

**FOLK TALES
OF
ASSAM**

20 VOLUMES IN THE SERIES

- 1. Folk Tales of Kashmir by Bani Roy Chaudhury**
- 2. Folk Tales of Tamilnadu by K.A. Seethalakshmi**
- 3. Folk Tales of Assam by Mira Pakrasi**
- 4. Folk Tales of Orissa by Shanti Mohanty**
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- 19. Folk Tales of Maharashtra and Goa**
- 20. Folk Tales of Haryana**

F O L K T A L E S O F A S S A M

MIRA PAKRASI



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GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Folklore in the different parts of India is a rich legacy for us. While researches in ancient and modern history have been directed in recent decades more to the succession of kings and political shifts not much notice has been paid to the culture, complex traditions and social beliefs of the common people. The sociologists have also to pay a good deal of attention to the customs and beliefs of the people and changes therein through the ages. They have rather neglected the study of folklore which is a reliable index to the background of the people. There has always been an easy mobility of the folklore through pilgrimages, *melas* and fairs. The wandering minstrels, *sadhus* and *fakirs* have also disseminated them. People of the North visiting the temples of the South and *vice versa* carry their folk-tales, songs, riddles and proverbs with them and there is an inconspicuous integration. The *dharamsalas*, inns and the *Chattis* (places of rest where the pilgrims rest and intermingle) worked as the clearing house for the folk tales, traditional songs and riddles. That is why we find a somewhat common pattern in folk literature of different regions. The same type of folk tale will be found in Kashmir and in Kerala with different regional complex. These stories were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth before they came to be reduced to writing.

Folklorists have different approaches to the appreciation of folklore. Max Muller has interpreted the common pattern in folk literature as evidence of nature-myths. Sir L. Gomme thought that a historical approach is the best for the study of folklore. But Frazer would rather encourage a commonsense approach and to him old and popular folk literature is mutually interdependent and satisfies the basic curiosities and instincts of man. That folklore is a vital element in a living culture has been underlined in recent years by scholars like Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown.

It is unfortunate that the study of folklore in India is of very recent origin. This is all the more regrettable because the *Panchatantra* stories which had their origin in Bihar had spread through various channels almost throughout the world. As late as in

1859, T. Benfey had held that there is an unmistakable stamp of Indian origin in most of the fairy tales of Europe. The same stories with different twists or complexes have come back to us through Grimm and Aesop and the retold stories are greedily swallowed by our children. That India has neglected a proper study of the beautiful motifs of our folk tales is seen in the fact that the two large volumes of dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend published by Messrs Funk and Wagnalls and Company of New York have given a very inadequate reference to India.

What is the secret of the fascination of the folk tales that the old, young and the children are kept enthralled by their recitals ? The same story is often repeated but does not lose its interest. The secret is the satisfaction that our basic curiosity finds in the folk tales. The folk tales through phantasies, make-beliefs and complacent understanding help the primitive man to satisfy his curiosity about the mysteries of the world and particularly the very many inexplicable phenomena of nature around him. We have an element of primitiveness in our mind in spite of the advancement of science around us. Even a scientist finds great delight in the fairy tales of the moon being attacked as the origin of the lunar eclipse. Through the folk tales man exercised his once-limited vision and somehow or the other we would like to retain that limited vision even when we have grown up. The advancement in science can never replace the folk tales. On the other hand, folk tales have helped the scientific curiosity in the man. In spite of the scientific explanation as to why earthquakes take place, the old, young and the child would still be delighted to be told that the world rests on the hood of the great snake and when the snake is tired with the weight, he shakes the hood and there is an earthquake. Among the Mundas, an aboriginal tribe in Bihar, there is a wonderful explanation of the Orion. The sword and belt of the Orion, the Mundas imagine, form their appropriate likeness to the plough and plough-share which the supreme *Sing Bonga* God first shaped in the heavens and then taught people on earth how to use the plough and the plough-share. It is further in the Munda folk tale that while the *Sing Bonga* was shaping the plough and the plough-share with a chisel and a hammer he observed a dove hatching on its eggs at a little distance. The *Sing Bonga* threw his hammer at the dove to

bag the game. He missed his mark and the hammer went over the dove's head and hung on a tree. The hammer corresponds to the Pleiads which resembles a hammer. The Aldebaran is the dove and the other stars of Hyades are the eggs of the dove. Any illiterate Munda boy will unmistakably point out these star groups.

Weather and climate have their own stories and are often connected with particular stages of the crops. The wet season and the hottest month are intimately associated with the ripening of crops or the blossoming of trees or the frequency of dust storms and stories are woven round them. But nothing is more satisfying as a folk story than the explanation of the phases of the stars, moon and the sun. A Munda would point out the milky way as the *Gai Hora* i.e. the path of the cows. The *Sing Bonga* God leads his cows every day along this path—the dusky path on the sky is due to the dust raised by the herd. The dust raised by the cows sends down the rains. A story of this type can never fail to sustain its interest in spite of all the scientific explanation of the astral bodies.

The “why and therefore” of the primitive mind tried to seek an answer in the surrounding animal and plant kingdom. Animals are grouped into different categories according to their intelligence and other habits. The fox is always sly while the cow is gentle. The lion and the tiger have a majestic air while the horse is swift, sleek and intelligent. The slow-going elephant does not forget its attendant nor does he forget a man that teases him. Monkeys are very near the mankind. The peacock is gay while the crow is shrewd. The tortoise is slow-going but sure-footed. The hare is swift but apt to laze on the road. The primitive mind is not unintelligent to decipher these inherent characteristics of the common animals he meets. Similarly, when he sees a large and shady peepal tree he naturally associates it as the abode of the sylvan god. The thick jungle with its trees and foliage is known to be frequented by thieves and dacoits. Any solitary hut in the thick of the forest must be associated with someone unscrupulous or uncanny. These ideas are commonly woven into stories and through them the primitive mind seeks to satisfy the eternal why and how of the mind. Folk literature is often crude and even grotesque. The stories of the witches and the ogres come in this category. There is nothing to be surprised

at that. They reflect the particular stage of the development of the human mind and also a projection of the beliefs and fads of the mind. Scientific accuracy should never be looked for in folk tales although folk tales are a very good reflex of the social development of a particular time.

It is enough if the basic ideas regarding the animal and plant kingdom still satisfy that the donkey is dense or stupid or the snake typifies slyness and the fox is deceitful repeated in ancient folk tales have stood the test of age and that would show that the primitive mind was not foolish or credulous. The very idea that the folk tales have woven man, nature, animal and plant creation together shows the great flight of imagination and a singular development of mind. Introduction of moral lessons or any dogma was not done as an after-thought but came in as a very natural development.

The last source of the folk tales is human society itself. The elemental moorings that are at the root of human society are sought to be illustrated in folk tales. The day-to-day life of the common man finds its full depiction in the folk tales. Parental love, family happiness, children's adventurous habits, love and fear for the unknown, greed etc. are some of the usual themes of folk tales. The common man yearns for riches and comforts, he cannot usually look for. He dreams of riches, princes, kingdoms etc. and finds a satisfaction in stories of fantasy. Men love gossip and scandal. Women cannot keep secrets, children will love their parents, a mother-in-law will always think the daughter-in-law needs to be told—these are some of the basic ideas that make up much of our daily life. The folk tales are woven round them and whether fantastic or with a moral undertone they only reflect the daily chores, tears and joys of the common man.

Unknowingly, the folklorists bring in the religious custom, beliefs, food habits, modes of dress, superstitions etc. and thereby leave a picture of the culture-complex of the region and its people. A tribal story does not picture a king riding a white big foaming horse followed by hundreds of other horsemen going for a *shikar*. In a tribal story the Raja will be found cutting the grass and bringing back a stack of it for feeding his cows but a folk tale more current in urban areas will have large palaces, liveried-servants, ministers and courtiers in the king's court. All this only means that the time and the venue of the origin of the stories are widely different. It

is here that the sociologists and the anthropologists come in useful. As life is different in rural and urban areas or is chequered with goodness or badness of the world so is folk literature diversified, as it must be—being a replica of life.

It is a pity that these beautiful folk tales in India were almost on the point of disappearance when a few pioneers mostly consisting of foreign missionaries and European scholars looked into them and made compilations in different parts of India. Our present run of grandmothers knows very little of them. The professional story tellers who were very dearly sought after by the old and the young, not to speak of the children, have almost completely disappeared from India. The film industry and the film songs pose a definite threat to folklore.

The Sterling Publishers are to be congratulated for launching the project of publishing a compilation of 20 volumes consisting of the folk tales of different regions. The work has been entrusted to specially selected writers who have an intimate knowledge of their region. The regional complex of the stories has been sought to be preserved as far as possible. The stories have an elemental involvement about them and they are such as are expected to appeal to the child and its parents. We expect the reader of the folk tales of the particular region to have a feeling after a study of the stories that he has enjoyed a whiff of air of that area. We want him to have an idea of how Kashmiri folks retire in wintry nights with the *Kangri* under the folds of their clothes to enjoy gossips and how they enjoy their highly spiced meaty food. We want him to appreciate the splash of colour of the sari and the flowers that are a must in Tamilnadu. We want him to know the stories that are behind some of the famous temples in the South as Kanjeevaram temple. We want him to know the story regarding the construction of the famous Konarak temple. We want him to enjoy the stories of the heroes of Gujarat, Punjab and Rajasthan in their particular roles. We want the reader to have an idea of the peace and quiet of a hut in the lap of the Kumaon hills. We want the reader to enjoy some of the folk tales of Bengal and Bihar that have found wings in other parts of India and to appreciate the village life with their *Alpana* and *Bratas*. At the same time we want the reader to appreciate the customs and manners of the Santhals, Garos, and the other tribes inhabiting Nefa and Assam.

The Publishers want to have a miniature India in these volumes of folk tales of the different regions of India. It is an ambitious project. The authors have to be thanked for their interest in the work. I am sure they have enjoyed the assignment. It is hoped the books will be found useful and interesting to the public. I have no hesitation to say that the stories of the different areas do make out a miniature India. It is hoped the reader will enjoy the stories and will come to know a little of the region and its people.

P R E F A C E

IN the very prime of human history, men tried to find out means of making leisure enjoyable. They used to dance and sing and play on instruments collectively. Thus the folk songs and folk dances evolved. But there was another interesting institution which animated the leisure hours of the ancient man. That was the telling of tales. Tales were told by persons who were experts, who had attractive gestures and appropriate modulation of voice.

Nobody knew who composed these tales because these tales did not have any written version and the chief features of the tales are more or less common all over the world.

The folk-tales may have some common motif over the whole world but still the folk-tales of a particular area reflect the mind, the character, the religion, the social life and customs, the superstitions, the tradition, the culture and everything that makes them distinct from the other people of the world.

In this book the animal tales or fables will be found to be common to nearly every people of the world. There are also the legends of places and persons with local colour.

There are some ballads which are akin to tales. They are in prose and the prose narrative is interspersed with songs. Such is the story of 'Queen Kamala Kuori'.

The records available for the oral tales current in Assamese are not many. The Assamese name for oral tale is *Sadhu Katha*. The word is derived from *Sadhu* meaning a merchant. It is a tale told by a wandering merchant. Such stories have no geographical barriers.

The tribes in Assam are scattered over the whole region. They have a definite place and contribution to the Assamese culture. The folk-tales of the *Garos* and the *Mikirs*, the *Kacharis* and the *Khasis* are interesting and exotic in their flavour.

The tales current among the *Garos* have a pathetic quality. None of the tales told here has a happy end. In fact, in this collection only one of the *Garo* tales has a happy conclusion. But the imaginative quality of the *Garo* tales is really striking with their cultivation of the land in *Jhum* way and living the most simple, unassuming life detached from the main stream of human civilization.

The folk-tales of the *Khasis* on the other hand are grim in nature. We find blood-shed, fierce fighting, cruel betrayal, and terrible magic force revealed in awful ugliness. The stories have a lingering feeling of terror about them.

The *Kachari* stories have an interwoven pattern of cleverness and foolishness.

The folk-tales of the *Mikirs* have more of imagination. These stories arrest the mind with various sequences of surprising events coming rapidly but in them also there is the play of cleverness, amusing and bold in its nature.

I acknowledge my indebtedness to my predecessors and contemporaries who have stored much wealth in their publications. A bibliography is included.

I also convey my thanks to Shri Kulanath Gogoi, Assistant Editor, Assamese Indian National Bibliography. He has helped me to collect material in the Assamese language.

Mira Pakrasi

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1

THE LEGEND OF JAYAMALA

THE northern portion of the Goalpara district in Assam lies at the foot of Bhutan hills. Tearing through the dense forests of Bhutan hills runs down a stream. At the foot of the hills on the bank of this stream in Goalpara there lived in the days of old a Brahmin, Jayanath with his comely wife, Jayamala.

Jayanath was a priest. He used to perform Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, *Upanayan* (sacred thread ceremony), marriage rituals and other sacred rites to earn his livelihood. His wife Jayamala used to spin *Poita* (the sacred thread worn by a Brahmin) on her spinning wheel. The Brahmins in the adjoining villages bought all the sacred thread she spun. What they earned was enough for their needs which were limited. They could save some food which Jayamala gave to the deer and the pigs, the goats, the cows and birds like woodpeckers and snipes. Occasionally even some wild elephants would come and share the food. The wild creatures were friendly to this couple and in return they brought them oranges, plantains, jack-fruits, mangoes and pine-apples and *arum* (*kachu dhenki sak* and bamboo shoots for food. Jayamala's pleasure of life was her affection for the wild animals and her devotion to her husband.

The smooth tenor of their life was soon lost. Jayanath's services were called for conducting the last rites of a well-to-do Brahmin. This Brahmin had only a daughter who was very ugly, lazy, spoilt and extremely selfish. She was not married because of all this. The Brahmin's widow felt helpless with such a daughter and implored Jayanath to marry her. Jayanath, as he was fond of his wife, first spurned the proposal. But as the girl would inherit all her father's property he could not but yield to the widow's wish for the greed of money.

Then Jayanath brought *riha khonia* and *Mekala*, woven of *muga* and silk, a pair of bangles, ear-rings and necklace for his bride and a large pot of curd, some molasses and some big *mahseer* fish. In the evening he and his future wife were bathed solemnly. Next morning, the wedding was to be celebrated and the girl was called from her bed at day-break. Some curd was put on her forehead and she put on the dress brought by Jayanath and was ready for his welcome. Jayanath was then seated on a wooden stool before the entrance of the Brahmin's house and was smeared with sandalwood and crowned with flowers. He was led inside the house. A portion of the courtyard was fenced with slit bamboos. There the sacred fire was lighted with mango wood, and rice, flowers and ghee were offered to the fire by Jayanath himself as he was a Brahmin. The priest then tied the thumbs of Jayanath and the Brahmin's daughter with *Kusha* grass and *mantras* were uttered. Jayanath and the Brahmin's daughter were declared husband and wife. He returned to his hut with his rich, proud and selfish wife. Jayamala was hurt and shocked to see her husband married to another girl. She looked at them tearfully and went back to her hut.

In a few days Jayanath's second wife had a *temahala* (three storeyed) mansion built for herself and Jayamala beside the humble hut. The big house was full of life as there were many servants and maids and sentries there. Jayamala with a broken heart watched the prosperity of her husband with his growing love for his second wife. The second wife would never allow Jayanath to see Jayamala. Jayamala was assigned the job of bringing water from the river, and that was what she still lived for. For, while she would fill the gold *Jhari* of her rich husband, they would look at each other. That was the only link she had with her husband. In return for her service, the maids used to bring her a handful of rice in a brass plate at the end of the day. But Jayamala hated to touch this

food. She used to live on the fruits and roots brought to her by the animals ever since her husband married again. With the plate of rice in one hand, the gold *jhari* on the other, and a copper pitcher on her head, she would go walking through the forest to the river giving the rice away to the birds and animals she came across and when she reached the river bank she would sit there and think about her sad life. Tears would roll down her cheeks and mingle with the river water.

The elephant king often came to drink water from this river upstream. He would come with his herd of elephants, drink water from the river and play in the water. One evening he found the water salty and tasteless as he waded through and reached downstream. He asked one of his companions, "The water upstream is so tasty, how is it that it is salty and tasteless downstream?" The companion replied, "Your Majesty, a beautiful girl sits at the *ghat* every evening. She weeps and her tears mingle with the river water. The salty tears make the water downstream tasteless." The elephant king was moved to learn this and swam up to the girl. Jayamala had just taken up the copper pitcher on her head, the gold *jhari* in her hand, and was about to go back to her hut. The elephant king bored her way. He heard her story and asked her to leave the cruel world of man and join him to the kingdom of elephants and stay there as his queen. Jayamala did not readily agree. But she could not get much chance to think because a sudden surge of the river roaring like thunder swept away her small hut and her co-wife's big house all at once. Jayamala stood dumbfounded when the elephant king lifted her up on his back at ease.

Then the elephant king passed through the deep forests of *pine*, *sals* and *simul*, thick bamboo thickets and groves of betelnut and reed interspersed with jack-fruit and orange trees. The whole place was filled with the sweet scent of the wild roses and *Kapauphool*.

Thus the elephant king went on for seven days and seven nights till he reached his kingdom at the foot of the Bhutan hills.

The palace of the elephant king was standing there milk white—carved out of ivory and inside it was the throne of ivory. The elephant king went in and placed Jayamala on the throne. The beautiful Jayamala looked like a golden doll on the ivory throne. Thousands of elephants trumpeted the new queen and bowed before her. The elephant king took his new queen on his head once again and arrived at a miraculous water-fall with his herd of elephants. They went through a pass. The water-fall rolled in seven streams of seven colours. The elephant king put the water of the seven streams in seven jars and poured it on the new queen's head and look! she changed to a beautiful young female elephant. The copper pitcher on her head turned into the elevation on the forehead and the gold *jhari* changed into her trunk. The elephant king announced in his a jubilant voice, "Hereafter we shall serve you and your word will be our law." The queen led the herd of elephants back to the elephant land.

Till this day in the Goalpara district of Assam you will find many herds of elephants, each of them always led by a she-elephant.

TEJIMOLA

IN ancient times there was a merchant in Assam. He had two wives. The elder one had a daughter named Tejimola. The younger one had no child. Tejimola's mother died when she was a small child. Her step-mother brought her up. She did not love Tejimola, but as she was the only child in the family her father was very fond of her. The step-mother looked after Tejimola only to please her husband.

When Tejimola grew up to a girl of ten or eleven, her father took her to a rich man's daughter of the same age. They made good friends.

Because Tejimola's father was a merchant he had to go to many places to sell his goods. At that time there were no good roads and journey had to be slow. The merchants used to go out to the markets with a number of men, bullock-carts and guards. The voyages by river were also a hazard and there were pirates. Once he had to be away for six or seven months. He felt very unhappy as he had to leave his only daughter behind. But he could not do otherwise. He called his wife and said, "I am going out on business leaving Tejimola under your care. Look after her and love her. She is my beloved little child." Tejimola's step-mother agreed silently to do so.

She was happy that she could now torture Tejimola as much as she liked. But why should she stop at torturing her? She could even kill her if she liked. Yes, she would kill her anyhow. If Tejimola were to be married, at the time of her marriage her father would give her a large dowry. But if she died all this money would be saved, and her step-mother would send all this money to her mother.

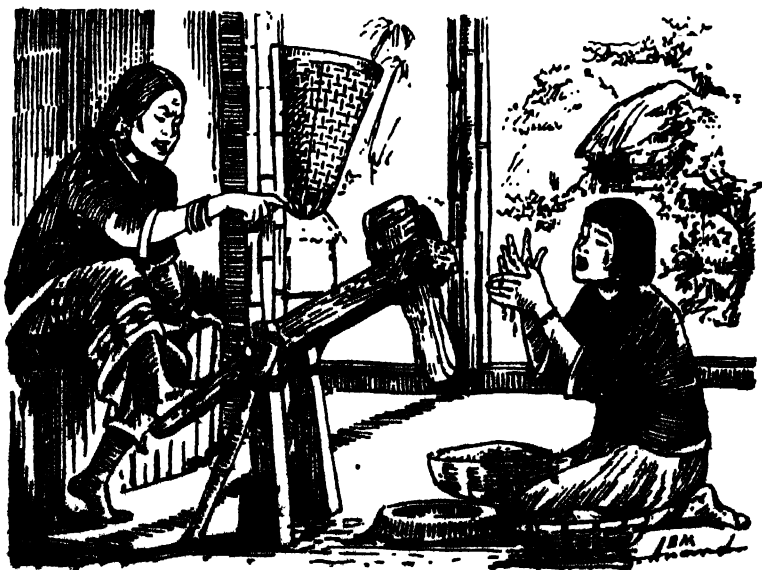
Poor Tejimola! as soon as her father's barge left the village her step-mother tried to find faults with her. She would beat her hard for the slightest offence.

She was suffering much when fortunately, one of Tejimola's friends' marriage was settled. It was to take place on the following day. Tejimola wished to attend the wedding party and to stay with her friend for some three or four days during the wedding. Her friend was very eager to have Tejimola near at the time of her marriage.

The step-mother did not forbid her to go. She even discussed eagerly about the dress Tejimola would wear at the wedding. Tejimola was surprised to see such change in her. The step-mother asked a number of people as to which *Riha* would go well and with which *Mekhala*. She had a lovely *Riha*, a splendid *Mekhala* and a gold embroidered *Khonia*. She told Tejimola, "*Aitee* (my girl), put on these when you are in your friend's house. I shall now pack them and give the packet to you. If you wear them now, they would be dirty for the wedding party." She made a packet of this *Riha*, *Mekhala* and *Khonia* and gave it to Tejimola. Had poor Tejimola known what was in the packet, she would not have accepted it. Her step-mother had placed a mouse in between the *Riha* and the *Mekhala* and some cinders in the *Khonia*.

While she was about to arrive in her friend's house Tejimola very gladly opened the packet. She imagined herself as one of the best dressed girls in the wedding party. But alas! all her hopes were lost. The *Riha* and the *Mekhala* were torn to pieces and the *Khonia* was dirty and burnt at places and smeared with ashes. She was scared to death. What would she say to her step-mother? She sobbed loudly. The servant who escorted Tejimola to her friend's house was also puzzled. She took another *Riha* and *Mekhala* from her friend's house and attended the wedding.

When Tejimola returned home her mother asked her about the dress. She was trembling with fear and could say nothing. She dropped the packet and stood sobbing. Her step-mother scolded her and beat her very cruelly. But she did not stop at that. She took Tejimola to the *dhenki* (rice pounding tool). She would have to put rice into the hole and her step-mother would pound it. While pounding with all her might she crushed Tejimola's right hand. Tejimola wept hard but was ordered to put paddy with her left hand. While doing so, the step-mother pounded with all her might and crushed her left hand also. Tejimola cried miserably but her step-mother ordered her to put rice in the hole with her left foot. The step-mother crushed her left foot. She was now ordered to push paddy with her right foot and the step-mother crushed her right foot also. Poor Tejimola now lost her hands and feet but her step-mother pounded rice with still more force and crushed Tejimola's head hard, with the result that Tejimola died.



Her mother buried her under the eaves of the rice pounding room. Some days passed. The neighbours asked about Tejimola. They had not seen her for a long time. Tejimola's mother told everyone that she had gone to her friend's house.

One day an old woman asked for a pumpkin from Tejimola's step-mother. She replied that she had no pumpkin creeper in her garden. The old woman took her to the garden. She saw a pumpkin plant just where she had buried Tejimola. She was pale with fear. She did not touch the plant herself. She told the woman, "well, pluck as many pumpkins as you like." As soon as the old woman was about to pluck a pumpkin the pumpkin plant sang, "Do not pluck my fruit, oh, old mother. I am Tejimola. My father is away. My mother killed me and buried me here." The old woman was shocked and told Tejimola's mother what she heard. The step-mother uprooted the plant and threw it away in a distant corner of the garden.

After some days a party of cowboys came to Tejimola's mother and asked her for some shaddocks. She told them that she had never such a tree in her garden. The cowboys took her to the garden and showed her the tree. She saw the tree standing on the spot where she had thrown the pumpkin plant. She permitted the cowboys to pluck as many shaddocks as they would like. As soon as the cowboys touched the tree the tree sang, "Brother cowboys, do not pluck my fruit. I am Tejimola. My father is away. My mother crushed me to death and threw me here." The cowboys repeated to the step-mother what they had heard. After the cowboys went away she cut the tree and threw its branches into the river.

Tejimola's father was coming home after finishing his business. His barge was mooring towards his home. He saw a very nice lily plant floating in the

river. He thought he would give it to Tejimola. As soon as he touched the lily plant it sang very sadly, "Father, father, don't pluck me. I am Tejimola. Mother has crushed me to death."

Tejimola's father understood everything. Still he wanted to verify the truth. He took on the palm of his left hand a little bit of the betel he was chewing. On the palm of his right hand he put a *laroo* (sweetmeat) and he said, "If you are my Tejimola be a *salika* bird and eat the betel from my hand. If you are not my Tejimola take the *laroo*."

Soon a *salika* bird came and perched on his left hand and ate the betel. He put the bird in a silver cage and brought it home. When he reached home he asked his wife about Tejimola. She told him that Tejimola had gone to her friend's house. The merchant then took a *gamcha* and told the *salika*, "If you are my Tejimola be in human shape and put on this *gamcha*." As soon as he uttered this Tejimola came out of her cage in her human shape, a lovely little girl and put on the *gamcha*. Her father clasped her to his bosom. The step-mother was driven away by the merchant. The little girl lived happily everafter with her father.

Riha is a six cubit long piece of cloth usually woven of *rhea* thread. It is folded breadthwise and cut and sewn. It is worn from the waist downwards.

Mekhala is also a six cubit long piece of cloth folded length-wise. It is worn from the waist to cover the upper portion of the body reaching the head. It serves the purpose of bodice blouse and everything. Borders are designed upon it.

Khonia is a scarf woven out of cotton or muga thread. Sometimes lovely borders are there. This is worn over the *Mekhala*. In Assam it is a must for every woman to know how to weave. Weaving is not a job confined to a particular community as in Bengal. In Assam in every household the women spin the thread and weave the cloth for the use of the family.

3

QUEEN KAMALA KUORI

ONCE there was a king in a certain area in Assam. He loved his people and did all that was possible to protect them. His subjects were also very loyal. The king led a happy life with his devoted queen Kamala Kuori.

But alas ! happiness does not last for ever. It is like a dew drop on a leaf. There happened to be a severe drought in the country. The fields were parched. There was not a jot of verdure anywhere. People and cattle were dying of thirst and hunger. The king was very anxious to save his people. He engaged some people to dig a big and deep tank. The tank was deep but where was the water ? It was dry. The digging was done deeper and deeper but there came not a drop of water from it. The king was lost in thought. The people lost all hopes.

At this time, the king had a dream. Yes, he would be able to save his people, there would come water from the big tank but he would have to sacrifice his beloved queen.

The king woke up. He struggled in his mind. On one side there was the queen, his loyal and devoted wife and on the other side there were his subjects; to protect them was his sacred duty. What could he do ? He told about his dream to queen Kamala Kuori. She heard it, kept silent for a while and then with tears in her eyes, said, "King, I must sacrifice myself for all these people, who are like my children. I know you will never be happy without me, but let me go."

The king stood on the bank of the tank. The

people were waiting with grief and suspense. The queen bade good-bye to the king and stepped into the hollow of the tank and lo! there was water—cool, clean, transparent—oozing out.

The king cried out to the victim,
 "O lady of my heart, Kamala,
 How much is the water?"
 "O lord of my heart,
 To my ankle is the water."

The water rose up higher. The king asked again,
 "O lady of my heart, Kamala
 How much is the water?"
 "O lord of my heart,
 To my knee is the water."

The water rose up still higher. The king asked again,

"O lady of my heart, Kamala
 How much is the water?"
 "O lord of my heart,
 To my waist is the water."

The queen went forward and the water rose up still higher. The king asked with a tear-choked voice,

"O lady of my heart, Kamala,
 How much is the water?"
 "O lord of my heart,
 To my neck is the water."

The queen went further ahead and now the water came in a surge high. The king asked with tears rolling down his cheeks,

"O lady of my heart, Kamala,
 How much is the water?"
 "O lord of my heart,
 To my head is the water."

The faint voice of the queen came and the beautiful queen Kamala Kuori was lost in deep waters for ever. The king and the subjects wailed her loss loudly. She is still remembered for the sacrifice she made for the well-being of her subjects.

THE STORY OF TENTON

FATHER went to plough the field. Mother went to transplant the seedlings of paddy, and sister went to catch fish. There was nobody in the house except Tenton. He had been asked to remain in because his sister's husband would be coming. His parents told him again and again to receive his brother-in-law with respect.

When the brother-in-law arrived at the gate of their house, he said, "Hullo, is your father in?" Tenton thought, "Look at him, he does not know how to address his superior. He says 'your father.' Why, he should have called my father *Deota*. He replied, "Father has gone to pierce the *patal* and make the earth upside down." The brother-in-law asked again, "Where's your mother?" Tenton thought, "The audacity he has ! he does not say *ai* when he refers to Mother and answered, "She has taken seven days old *Painta*¹ and has gone to revive the dead."² And no longer waiting for another question Tenton said further, "And sister has gone to filter the sea for precious gems." The brother-in-law felt insulted and went away immediately.

At dusk the parents returned home and when they heard that the son-in-law had gone back the father was in a fury and beat Tenton severely and turned him out of the house.

Tenton was not worried. He roamed about here

¹ *Painta* is cooked rice put in water to keep it fresh longer.

² To revive the dead—when the seedlings are collected for transplanting these look dead and dry and after transplantation these get back their freshness.

and there. After some days he made friends with two thieves. One night he broke into a house with his friends. The thieves collected the booty and slipped away. Tenton knocked against a drum and when it produced sound he began to play on it. The inmates of the house woke up by the loud sound and caught him. They decided to take him to the king's court.

On their way they came across a man who was very annoyed with his two unruly bullocks. He shouted, "I wish somebody would finish them with one blow." Tenton instantly took him on his words and killed the bullocks with just one blow. This was beyond the imagination of the owner and in great anger and grief he tied Tenton with a rope and joined the first party to charge him before the king's court.

As they were going on they found an old woman. She was selling bananas with the cry,

"Give me a pice to have a bunch,
Then give me a kick and go on your way."

This she said only to attract people by a piece of quaint humour but Tenton as his nature was, took a bunch of bananas from her, gave her the price and a kick also. She became angry and said she must have justice and started for the king's court.

Though Tenton was dragged to the king's court by three parties he was not perturbed at all. His answers were ready for the charges against him. For the first charge against him he replied, "Is there a thief so foolish to beat upon a drum in a house where he comes to steal? I searched for some *chira* (parched rice) which I needed very badly." The Tamuli Phukon, minister to the king, was fully satisfied with his explanation and remarked, "His words are worth a hundred rupees."

Then Tenton was given the second charge and asked to reply. To this he said, "I did not do any wrong. The man invited someone's help to finish his unruly bullocks and I did only what he wanted someone to do." The Tamuli Phukon agreed and observed, "His words are worth a thousand rupees."

To the third charge against him Tenton defended himself boldly. He said, "I did exactly as the woman wanted me to do. How should I know that she did not mean what she said?" The Tamuli Phukon was much impressed with Tenton's intelligence and observed, "His words are worth a lakh of rupees."

The king acquitted the boy of all the charges. Tenton went out of the king's court with a glint of mischief in his eyes.

A few days passed. Tenton went to the king's court. No, Tenton was not tied with a rope and dragged into the king's court by someone. He went there on his own. "A word is a word," he reminded the minister. Yes, the minister owed him a hundred, a thousand and a lakh of rupees. He must pay the price which he declared for the intelligent words of Tenton. The king could not ignore the claim of the boy Tenton. He gave him this large sum of money.

Tenton filled two baskets with the money. But he was not a boy to go away silently. He stood at the door of the minister in a heroic pose and shouted, "If one gives me a good and satisfying meal one gets all this wealth." You must be wondering why he shouted like this. Well, you will see what he gained by this peculiar venture now.

Tamuli Phukon had a young and beautiful daughter called Champa. Champa had a maid-servant on whom she counted much. She wished that her mistress should get all this money and so she persuaded

Champa to invite Tenton for a meal. Champa granted the wish of her favourite. She cooked delicious dishes and invited Tenton to a meal. She placed a seat for him, bathed him and fed him with her own hands, and after the meal she gave him *pan* and *supari*.

Now Tenton had no excuse to break his promise. So he gave all the money to her and went back to the king. He said to the king, "Oh king, will you kindly allow me to put you some questions?" The king smilingly assented. Then Tenton asked, "My lord, who is it that places a seat for someone and asks someone to take it? Who is it that bathes and feeds someone with her own hands? Who is it that keeps someone's money?"

The king answered readily, "Why! it must be the wife! But what does it mean?"

Tenton said with a grin, "My lord, please ask the Tamuli Phukon's daughter." The king understood everything.

The Tamuli Phukon was beside himself with rage. His foolish and greedy daughter had been trapped by this mischievous boy. The king told him that he could give his daughter in marriage to this boy and calmed him, saying, "Tamuli Phukon, this is a clever boy and he will make a nice husband for your Champa."

Tenton became the son-in-law of Tamuli Phukon. The king made him a Tamuli next in rank to his father-in-law and he lived happily everafter.

THE STORY OF THE FOUR THIEVES

IN the interior of Assam, there was once an old couple. They were rich but they had no children. They had two houses. They slept in one of them. There were four thieves. They used to loiter about the old couple's house for stealing. The old man always thought of how to baffle the thieves.

One day he filled a piece of bamboo joint with cow-dung, dirty water and husk of rice. This he left hanging on the rafters of the *dhenki*¹ shed. Bamboo joints are commonly used in Assam for storing stuff.

After nightfall the four thieves came. They first wanted to know if the old couple was asleep. They pricked their ears to listen to any noise. The old man asked his wife, "Old woman! Old woman! where have you put the molasses and milk with *chira* (parched rice)?" The old woman burst out, "Woe to me! I have left them hanging on the rafters of the *dhenki-shed* and the thieves will easily get it." The thieves were very glad to hear this. How nice it would be to eat *chira*, milk and molasses! Their mouth watered. Very stealthily they went to the *dhenki* shed and took away the bamboo joint. They gathered some plantain leaves to use as plates, divided the spoil in equal shares and sat down to eat. One of them curled his nose and said, "smells rather strong, doesn't it?" Another touched the mess with his hand and realised what had happened. They burst out laughing. The old man rushed at them with his big stick and the four thieves ran away.

Another night the old man heard the sound of the

¹ *Dhenki* is a wooden contraption for pounding paddy, rice etc.

thieves and he asked his wife, "Old woman! Old woman! where have you hung the bag of salt?" The old woman replied, "I have hung it upon the south wall of our sleeping house, a wretched mistake by me! the thieves will get it without trouble." Now you may be surprised to find that the thieves were eager to steal salt, because in some places in the interior villages of Assam salt is not easily available. So one of the thieves, after listening to the talk of the old couple, pushed his hand in through the opening of the thatch and tried to find out the bag. As soon as he pushed his hand in, the old man cut his hand with a knife. The thief did not tell this to his companions. He only said, "I cannot find it," and fled away. As the other three thieves did not know what had happened they also felt about for the bag of salt and one got his finger cut, another his ear and the fourth his nose.

Their wounds bleeding, the thieves were in great pain. They tried to find out something soothing for themselves. And what else could they find in a pot but the ashes of the trunk of a plantain tree! The pungent salt ashes were soaked in the cuts of the first thief and the pain became more acute. He did not speak about this to his companions, and they also dipped their wounds in this pot. And then all of them hopped about with twitching pain. At that very time the old man came out with his big stick and drove them away.

One day the old man went out to cut reeds for a fence around his house. And there he saw the four thieves fast asleep under an *Ou* tree². This tree bears fruits which are very heavy and hard. An idea of playing a trick on the thieves crossed the mind of the old man. He cut some of these fruits keeping the stalks long, and very deftly tied one fruit to the hair of each

² 'Ou' tree is called '*Chalita*' or '*Chalta*'. It bears hard sour fruits which are eaten in pickles. Botanical name of this tree is *Dilensis indica*.

thief. Then he shouted, "Thief ! thief!" The thieves were roused suddenly from their sound sleep and began to run. As they were running, the heavy big fruits were bumping on their heads, and they were thinking that the old man was striking them. They became more panicky and ran on breathlessly. When they were tired of running only then they discovered the trick the old man had played on them.

The old man did not stop here. He wished to harass the thieves once again as he was very angry with them. So he hid himself into the mat receptacle for storage of paddy and asked his wife, "Where have you kept the brass cups and plates, my old woman?" He imitated the voice of the old woman and answered his own question, "I have kept them in the paddy receptacle under the *dhenki* shed." The thieves greedily rushed towards the *dhenki* shed and lifted up the paddy receptacle to carry it away. But it was very heavy. One of them said, "My goodness! isn't it too heavy?" Another replied, "Well, there would be many cups and plates inside." And they gladly went away with their booty.

After a while they came across a small river. As they were wading through the old man said, "Look here, I am getting wet! lift it up." The thieves heard this but could not make anything out of it and proceeded on with their burden.

Soon they came into deeper water and the old man burst out in anger, "Stupid brutes! sons of slaves! can't you see your way? I am getting soaked through and through." The thieves were beside themselves with fear now and dropping their burden in the water they disappeared hastily. The old man, as you see, had to pay for being too cunning.

THE SEVEN FOOLS AND THE BRAHMIN

THERE were seven fools somewhere in Darrang district. Because they were fools they could not find any job. They were very poor. So they went out in search of fortune. On their way they came across a ploughed field full of white clods. They took this to be a sheet of water and started swimming. After crossing the field they counted themselves. Each time their number came to six as none of them counted himself.

They were crying aloud for their lost friend while a Brahmin passed that way. He asked them, "Why are you all weeping?" "Alas, we were seven and one of our friends has been drowned while crossing this stream," they said, pointing at the ploughed field. The Brahmin realised that they were fools. He told them, "Well, I shall find out your missing friend, if you promise to serve me." They eagerly agreed. The Brahmin gave one of them seven pieces of betelnut and told him to count them. The fool counted these. The Brahmin told him to distribute one piece to each of his friends keeping one for himself. He did this and they discovered that none of them was lost. They were now glad to follow the Brahmin to work for him. While the fools were serving the Brahmin, one day he ordered them to plough the entire land high up the *Simul* tree. The fools thought that they were to plough the land from above the *Simul* tree. They took the cattle and the ploughs for tilling the land. They fastened the cattle to the ploughs and climbed the *Simul* tree holding the ropes. The ropes gave way. The cattle were hurt and some of them died and the ploughs were broken. The old man was disgusted but he did not dismiss them. He bought new ploughs and some new cattle for tilling his soil.

One day the Brahmin sent his son with the fools to work on the field. He told them, "Look here, this boy is lazy. If he sits idle push him along." After working for some time, the boy was sitting idle for a while. The seven fools pushed their seven knives into his body and the poor boy fell dead on the spot. After dusk the fools returned home. The Brahmin did not find his son and asked them about him. They replied, "You told us to push him along if he idled away his time. So we pushed our knives one by one into his body and he died." The Brahmin was stunned. He buried his son¹ with tears. But he still did not dismiss the fools. He thought that he would be more exact in future while telling them to do anything.

One day the fools went to reap the paddy. They came home with the burden of the harvest. They asked the Brahmin where they should keep their burden. The Brahmin told them, "Ask my wife and she will tell you." When they approached the old woman she was very busy with her work and she was annoyed with them and said, "Put them on my head." The seven fools literally carried out what she told them and heaped all the harvest on the poor old woman's head. The old woman succumbed to death under the heavy weight of the paddy. When the Brahmin asked them if they had stored the paddy they told him what had happened. The Brahmin was shocked. He ordered the fools to take the old woman's dead body for burial. They took the dead body fastened to a bamboo and on the way it bumped against something and fell off. When the fools reached the burial ground they found that there was no dead body fastened onto the bamboo. They also saw another old woman walking a few paces away. They shouted, "Look here, the old woman wants to escape and she is pretending to be somebody else. Catch hold of her." They caught her and forcibly buried her.

¹ Kacharis bury their dead.

When they came back they described to the Brahmin what had happened. The Brahmin could no longer tolerate them and decided to finish them off. He asked them to cut down a huge *Simul* tree from the trunk and not to move out till the whole tree fell. The fools did exactly as told and the big tree crashed on them and killed them.

THE STORY OF A SLY SERVANT

A Kachari Brahmin was going to his mother-in-law's house with his servant. The Brahmin, as is the custom, bought some bananas and other eatables to take as present for his mother-in-law. He gave the basket of presents to the servant to carry. He told him, "Look here, don't eat any of these bananas. I can see everything from behind just as well as I can see in front.

Warning the servant thus the Brahmin marched ahead. After a while the servant felt hungry and broke one of the bannas from the bunch and held it before his master's back and ate it. Like that he went on eating till all the bananas were eaten.

When the Brahmin saw that the bunch of bananas was not there, he got very angry and asked the servant what he had done with it. "Why," the servant retorted innocently, "you told me you could see at your back, so I showed you every banana and ate it. You did not say anything. How could I know that you would be angry?" The Brahmin could say nothing.

At noon they halted at a place to cook their lunch. They had a few *Khawai* fishes with them. These were cooked by the Brahmin as he would not eat food cooked by the servant. The Brahmin served one fish to the servant and kept the rest for himself. While they were eating, the servant asked innocently, "Can you tell me, sir, whether the *Khawai* fishes swim about alone or in a shoal?" "Why ! of course in a shoal," the Brahmin replied. Immediately the servant placed the fish given to him on the Brahmin's plate and said, "In that case this fish also should be in a shoal."

The Brahmin immediately left his food as he would

not eat food touched by the servant. The servant had a good meal of all the fish. The Brahmin remained hungry for the whole day.

On their way they found some *Simul* trees. The servant asked him, "What are these trees? The Brahmin was educated, so he replied, "These are called *Sirmolu*." "No, no, these are *himolu*," the servant protested and took a bet of five blows if it was not so. They met some cowherd boys. The servant asked them the names of the trees. They were illiterate, so they said that the name was *himolu*. And as soon as they uttered *himolu*, the servant gave the Brahmin five blows. Next day, some goatherds were passing that way. The servant asked, "Sir, what are these animals?" "These are *chag*." "No, no, these are *chagali*," the servant protested, "and here are five blows for you." He again gave five blows to his master.

Next day they came across a flock of herons. The servant asked the Brahmin, "Sir, what are these birds?" The Brahmin said, "These are *bog*." "Oh no, you know nothing, these are *boguli* and here are again five blows for you," said the servant and showered another five blows on his master.

While the Brahmin was feeling miserable, they came near his mother-in-law's house at night. The Brahmin was very hungry, so he sent his servant ahead to tell them to have his supper ready. The servant reached the house before his master and told the people there to cook a duck for him.¹ While it was being cooked he secretly put a lot of ashes of banana tree into the meat.²

¹ Honourable guests, specially sons-in-law in Assam are given meat of duck with *bora-rice*. Bora-rice is cooked with vapour only as it is of very soft and sticky nature.

² The Kacharis use the ashes of the banana trees as salt.

The Brahmin was very hungry. Though his mouth was burning with the acrid taste of the ashes he ate his food silently. He could guess that the servant had done some mischief. He was being teased by the servant in all possible ways and he was determined to take revenge.

He wrote a long letter to his brother and asked the servant to deliver it. The servant was illiterate. He felt suspicious about the contents of the letter. He stopped on the way and requested a passer-by to read it for him. The man read from the letter that the Brahmin had asked his brother to kill the servant. He heard this and immediately tore the letter into pieces. He persuaded the stranger to write another letter like this: "Dear brother, as soon as you get this letter marry my niece to this servant. I shall not be able to attend the wedding. But you must carry out my wish."

The servant gave this letter to the Brahmin's brother. He was very annoyed by such a whimsical order from his elder brother but he could not disobey him. He married his daughter to the servant.

The Brahmin came to his brother's house after some months. He thought that the servant must have been killed. But to his surprise, he saw him as his son-in-law. He decided to kill this man at night. But somehow, his niece came to know about his idea, and she told her husband to sleep at a different place. She advised him to put in the bed his tame calf with its feet and mouth tied up.

The Brahmin came at night to his niece's room to kill her husband. He mistook the calf for his servant and killed it. In the morning he found out his mistake. He was a Brahmin. For a Brahmin it is a sin to kill a cow. To free himself from the sin, he invited

all the people to a feast without telling them the occasion.

In the meanwhile, he told the servant who was now his son-in-law, to bury the calf in the garden. The man buried the cow with its tail sticking out of the ground.

As the guests came and sat for the feast, the servant ran into the garden and pulled the buried carcass of the calf by the tail and took it to the guests. He shouted, "No, no the Brahmin hasn't killed a cow and he isn't giving the feast for that reason!"

The guests were angry and refused to take food. They shouted, "Fie, fie, a Brahmin has killed a cow!" and went away. And that is all.*



* This is a peculiar manner in which the Kachari folk tales are finished.

THE STORY OF THE GODDESS KAMAKHYA

KAMAKHYA Devi's temple near Gauhati in Assam is very well known. This goddess is worshipped daily by thousands, many of whom come from beyond Assam. It is said that goddess Kamakhya grants the wishes of the persons that worship her with great devotion. But there was no goddess Kamakhya and her temple at that place before. It was a wild place. This is the story of how Kamakhya goddess came there.

People who live in the Garo Hills district of Assam and its adjoining places are called Garos. The Garo Hills district is to the north of Mymensingh in East Pakistan.

In ancient times the Garos lived in a country called Mandalae. They were prosperous. They lived in big villages. They built big and high houses for themselves and magnificent temples for their gods and goddesses. They had their kings and chieftains.

The Garos were once attacked suddenly by a wild, cruel and vast number of men from the north. They defended themselves with all their might but their enemies were much larger in number and had more weapons. The Garos were defeated.

A certain division of the Garos settled in a country called *Salaram Mithdaichak*. There was a woman among them called Nunui Nanokhi also called Noini Mechik. She had with her an image of a goddess named Phojou. Phojou means the goddess who causes living beings to be born, seeds to sprout, flowers to bloom and mature into fruits. She used to carry this image on her head always.

An Assamese king Lila Sing reigned there at that time. He was extremely cruel and wicked. He was so heartless that he used the Garos as beasts of burden. The good-natured Garos could not go on bearing all the cruel treatment. They waged a war against the king. There were leaders such as *Gume, Roti, Asal, Jarin, Domepa, Jirik, Sakso, Wasang, Athu, Badingring, Boriding, Kepesa, Jajang, Silma* and *Rothang* who fought bravely against King Lila Sing.

As usual in a war, the people were living a very disturbed life. The houses were destroyed. There was no food. Dead bodies of the soldiers were scattered here and there and many were going away in search of a new place to settle. Nunui Nanokhi was also escaping with her children. The children were tired and hungry. They were crying aloud. To pacify them she put down the image of Phojou on the ground and rested a while on the way with her children.

After a while she wanted to resume her journey and stretched her hand to lift up the image of the god-



dess Phojou. But the image was hard fixed on the spot. She tried hard to take it away but in vain. She realised that the goddess wished to stay where she was. She performed her *Krita* (worship) by sacrificing one of her goats and offering wild flowers to the goddess.

The goddess Phojou remained for ever at the place where Nunui Nanokhi placed her and her worship has been going on for ages. The Garos call this place *Salaram Mithdaichak* which means the sanctuary of the past. People other than the Garos call it Kamakhya. Very quickly Kamakhya Devi became the most popular deity in Assam.

9

THE THIEF WHO REPENTED HIS SIN

ONCE upon a time in a village among the Garos there was a man called Rakda. He had a son called Dengja.

It did not rain enough that year; so there was famine in the village. People were starving. Rakda took his son Dengja with him and set out for a distant place. There the father and son would work and buy foodgrains with the money they would earn. They worked in the paddy field of a rich man for some days in scorching sun. They sweated all over as they went on with their work. At the end of the work they filled their basket with foodgrains which they received as the price of their hard toil. Father and son started towards their home.

They felt tired on their way and stopped under a shady *Pepul* tree. Dengja felt very thirsty, and went to find some water. He told his father to wait for him under the *Pepul* tree.

As soon as Dengja was out of sight Rakda thought, "How much do I suffer for want of rice at home! I wish I could have had more of rice. Now Dengja is not here and there is nobody to see whatever I do. So, I shall take some more paddy from out of Dengja's basket." And he stole three handfuls of rice out of his son's basket. He smoothed the whole thing so that nobody would find out the theft.

In course of time Rakda fell ill and died. Dengja was a dutiful and obedient son. He did the funeral rites of his father with great devotion and care. He observed the tribal custom and killed a dog, some bulls and fowls and performed the funeral ceremony and at last cremated the body of his dead father on a pyre of dry wood.

Afterwards he placed a *kima* or a memorial post in front of his father's house.

Mortals do not know, but mother goddess *Dingipa Bahbra* sees everything. Nothing is lost, nothing overlooked or forgotten; every action, thought or feeling of ours is recorded by her and reward or punishment comes as deserved.

Rakda was born again. Owing to his theft he could no more become a human being. He was born as a cow. He was made to plough the paddy field of Dengja who was his son in his previous life. After five years the cow died. Dengja put the fleshless head of the cow in his vegetable garden as a scare-crow.

There the trees and plants were full of green and good vegetables. A woman was tempted to steal them. After dusk she came into the garden softly to steal some vegetables, but as soon as she touched one of the plants something very strange happened. The woman was chilled to her marrow.

The head of the cow addressed her thus, "Beware, oh woman, do not steal! I stole some paddy out of my son's basket during the last famine. *Dingipa Bahbra* did not forgive me for my foul deed and I was born as a cow to till the paddy field of my son. I had to live like that for five long years. Now I am dead. But I guard my son's garden to repent the wrong I did once. I am compelled to do this."

The woman ran fast while her heart was throbbing heavily. She reported to Dengja how the cow spoke to her. Dengja lost his peace of mind. He took away the cow's head from his vegetable garden and burnt it.

Next night Dengja had a dream. His father asked

him, "My son, have you fully pardoned me?" Dengja felt very sad and kind to his father. He said, "Oh, yes, father, I have." "Then let me depart in peace," said Rakda.

Dengja woke up from his sleep, relieved of his gloom.

10

HOW PEACOCKS CAME ON THIS EARTH

IN Assam there is a type of hill people called Garos.

In times of old there was a very rich Garo who had a very beautiful daughter. According to the custom among the Garos she was to be the heir to her father's property. When she grew up she was married to a cousin on her mother's side as is the rule with the Garos. Her father owned a very attractive piece of silk woven with many coloured threads. This was a magic silk. A goddess had given it to the great grandmother of the Garo's wife. There was a *mantra* or incantation which one should utter while touching this silk. Otherwise something very grim would happen about which you will come to know as the story goes on.

In course of time the Garo and his wife grew old and died. The girl and her husband got all the property of the rich Garo. They also got this magic silk. While they were living happily, on a bright day the girl put the piece of silk outside to sun it. She was feeling care-free and joyful and she wished to go for catching some prawns in the nearby stream. She took a *chekka* (triangular fishing basket) and a *koksi* (fish creel) with her. Before going out she asked her husband not to touch the silk even if there be heavy rain.

It was a matter of chance that she did not tell her husband about the magic quality of the silk and did not teach him the *mantra* which one should recite while touching this silk and now there was no time for it. She was not worried as there was very slight chance of raining on such a sparkling day.

But the will of God is unknown. The clear sky

darkened. Mass of black clouds gathered and it rained heavily. The silk cloth got soaked. The husband anxiously shouted for his wife at the top of his voice. The girl was running fast. But as soon as she reached home she found that in his excitement her husband forgot what she had told him about the piece of silk and he had touched it.

And lo! as soon as he touched it the cloth stuck to him and his body slowly underwent a change. He started changing into a bird with splashing colours on his wings and tail. The girl was very sad and was moved by what had happened. Lost in grief she touched the bit of silk left till now forgetting to recite the *mantra* and she was also turned into a female bird. Her plumes became less colourful as most of the silk was already absorbed into her husband's body.

Hereafter they lived as a peacock and a peahen. Whenever clouds gather in the sky, lightning flashes and thunder roars they cry with fear lest the rains should wash away their garment of many coloured plumes.

MANY, many years ago, there lived a rich man in a village somewhere on the bank of the Singwil, a river by the north-west of the Ranggira Hill¹ in the Garo hills of Assam. He had four daughters. The elder of the four daughters were Awil and Singwil. They were nice and beautiful young girls. He and his wife loved them dearly. The younger ones were infants. They were Nose and Dimse.

They lived happily when the old grandmother—their mother's mother—came to stay with them. The granny from the very day she came, did not like Awil and Singwil, because they were young and beautiful and she was an ugly old woman. When Awil and Singwil would husk, put rice to boil after winnowing the husk and go for some other work she would come and throw a lump of cowdung or some hair or some clods of earth into the pot and spoil the rice. They would bring water from the river and go to rest for a while when she would throw some mud or sand in the water and spoil it.

The old woman was very shrewd. She would never beat Awil and Singwil herself but every day she would

¹ The Ranggira Hill : A hill 2,205 feet in height on the north-west of Tura. For the inhabitants of Tura town it makes a prominent land-mark. It is also called Nanggira.

The Garos believe that their forefathers first cleaned this jungle for *jhum* cultivation with one hand, grasping *milams* (two edged swords) and *spis* (knives) with the other for fear of enemies and tigers.

Even as late as at the inception of British rule the Garos used to perform human sacrifice to their gods by the side of an old pond on the top of this hill.

complain to their mother against them. Their mother would be annoyed with them and would often beat them.

One day their mother gave Awil and Singwil some paddy from the barn and told them, "Dry this paddy in the sun, pound it, winnow the husk and cook the rice. After cooking, bring water from the river. I am going to the paddy field to clear the weeds. I shall be a little late. Please see to all this before my return."

After their mother left, the two sisters cleaned the paddy and then put it on the courtyard to dry. It was a very hot day. Their sisters Nose and Dimse raised a cry for a bath in the river. Awil and Singwil told their granny to keep an eye on the paddy and took Nose and Dimse to the river.

They saw a big fish coming to the edge of the water and caught it. Nose and Dimse wanted the fish to be cooked on the very spot. They tried to cajole their little sisters, but they would not listen. They played with the sand to please Nose and Dimse, and reached home late. In the meanwhile the cruel old woman collected all the dry paddy together, dug a hole and hid all of it.

Awil and Singwil asked her about the paddy, and she said wailing, "Alas children, a big wild pig came with a cock. I couldn't stop them. They ate every bit of the paddy."

They took some more paddy from their barn. As soon as they started winnowing the rice, their mother returned.

She saw that the girls hadn't finished any work and she put a wry face. The old woman took the chance and said, "Your daughters do not like to work. They were roaming about here and there.

They were not at home. A pig and a cock have eaten up all the grains." The mother lost her patience. She beat Awil and Singwil and shut them in the pig sty. She did not open the sty even the next morning. They felt restless being shut in the pig sty. They were used to running about the hills and the river for the whole day. When the forest would be ringing with the chirping of the birds they would feel that the world around was inviting them to enjoy its beauty. They wept hard when Awil consoled Singwil thus, "Don't weep, I have found a way out to escape from mother. Let us first have this sty opened."

Some children were playing with *gila seeds* outside the pigsty. A *gila seed* slipped into the pigsty. Awil said to the children, "If you open the door I shall return the *gila seed*". The children obeyed her and they came out.

Awil cooked some rice and killed a favourite cock of their father's and stewed the meat with some vegetables. They were eating and thinking about their plight. Awil suggested to her sister, "Let us be a pair of doves and fly away. Mother will not be able to beat us any more."

Singwil collected some feathers from the fowlhouse and stuck those to their bodies with wax. A *dohkongsi* (water magpie) helped them in the job. Awil uttered some magic words and lo! these young girls were turned into two doves. They flew and reached the *jhum* field where their mother was working. They perched on the topmost branch of a tree and began to sing sadly thus :

"Gukuru—gitu—guk—gu—gu—gu¹
With a piece of thorny firewood,
We were beaten by you, Mother:

¹ Gukuru - gitu - guk - gu - gu - gu : The Garo fancy of the cooing of the wild doves.

Guk-guk.guk, Awil and Singwil, we
 sisters, two, guk-guk-guk,
 Nose, Dimse, younger ones,
 Gu-gu-gu, we had not
 Cooked rice with husk and
 Cowdung for you, Mother,
 Guk-guk-guk, we had not drawn
 Water with sand for father.
 Guk-guk-guk, for nothing we
 Were made to wander, Guk-guk
 Gukuru—gitu—guk-guk-guk.”

Their mother was puzzled. She had never heard any bird singing in a human voice. She feared that something must have happened to her daughters. She hastened towards home and found them missing.

Their father had gone to another village for marketing. He was late while buying things and could not return home that night. Next day on his way back he was resting under a tree when he heard a pair of doves cooing thus :

“Gukuru—gitu—guk-guk-guk
 Father has gone to the market;
 He brings some white cock gu-gu-gu
 A white backed pig, he brings,
 Guk-guk.Awil and Singwil
 Are sisters two, guk-gu-gu;
 Nose; Dimse, younger ones,
 Guk-guk. . . .guk, black-striped cloth
 Father wears, guk. . . .guk-guk;
 Leading a small bull comes he
 Guturu-gitu-guk-guk-guk.”

The father ran home anxiously and when he learnt everything he burst into tears like a child.

Their parents were weeping sadly when a pair of doves came flying and sat on the thatch of their house.

The mother brought all the dresses and ornaments and put them together in the courtyard and called her daughters to come back to human shape and take them. "I shall never rebuke you again, come and take all this," she implored them, weeping.

But Awil and Singwil found out the joy of being birds. They did not care to return to their parents. They answered, "If you really love us then put a pair of necklaces on the *Wagong* (the bamboo-hanger for dresses on the courtyard)." Their mother put a pair of necklaces there. They took the necklaces and flew away.

There was a paddy field in one of the valleys of the Garo Hills. Two brothers, Anal and Gunal were clearing the weeds from their land with *daos*. A pair of doves were cooing from upon a nearby tree.

"Gukuru—gitu-guk-guk
We, Awil, Singwil sisters two.
Guk-guk-guk. You Anal, Gunal
Brothers two, Guk-guk-guk—"

The younger brother Gunal said to the elder Anal, "Listen how the doves are talking like human beings." The elder brother was very busy with his work. He was annoyed and beat his brother with the handle of his *dao*.

But the elder brother Anal had also heard the doves talking human language, and decided to set a trap for these doves. It so happened that Awil was caught in the trap of Anal and Singwil in that of Gunal.

Anal was voracious, so he killed and cooked his dove and ate it. But Gunal put his dove in a cage as a pet.

The two brothers went to work on their soil as usual. When they came back they saw that the house

was cleared and rice cooked. It was a pleasant surprise. The next day the same thing happened. They were now afraid of some evil spirit. Anal decided to find out the mystery. He bore two holes on the side of a mat and rolled himself into it. He stood at the corner of the room watching through the holes. But as he could not find out anything he lay down on the floor and started to snore very soon.

When Gunal's turn came to watch he was determined to remain awake. He cut his toes and sprinkled some salt on the wound. The pain would not allow him to fall asleep. Singwil did not know this. She came out of the cage in human form. She cleaned the house and cooked the rice and soon as she was about to resume her bird shape Gunal caught hold of her dress. She tried to escape but Gunal would not let her go. She said, "Leave me, if you don't let me go calamity will befall you." He said that he wished to marry her. She replied, "Then do not blame me if anything harmful happens." Gunal was not afraid of anything. Singwil had to agree to be his wife.

After his marriage Gunal built two separate houses for himself—one inside the village and the other outside, on a lofty tree. This house was built thirty feet high on the tree. The branches were cut off and a platform was built. On that platform he built a *borang* (hut on the top of a tree) with bamboos and grass. He placed a ladder on the tree to get upon the *borang*. Gunal on the *borang* with his wife was as happy as a pair of doves under the blue sky.

Anal could not bear to see him so happy. He was green with jealousy. He hatched a plan to spoil Gunal's happiness. He went to Gunal in his *borang* and told him, "Gunal, let us go to the river and catch some fish and crabs."

Gunal with his candid nature did not suspect Anal

at all. While fishing they went far off from the village. Gunal was searching for crabs. Anal went ahead and dug out a hole in the sand as big as to hold a human being inside. Then he shouted, "Gunal, come on quickly, there are crabs and *nahchi* fishes¹ in Swarm, I cannot catch them all." Gunal rushed at the spot. He said, "Dig this hole a little deeper so that all the fishes and crabs assemble there."

Gunal went inside the hole and began to dig it deeper. As he was busy with his work Anal, wicked as he was, began to throw big stones inside the hole in a shower. The hole was jammed and Gunal was buried alive. Anal came to the *borang* of his brother. Singwil had some apprehension when she saw him alone. Anal told her, "He is a wicked fellow. He has left you. He will never return. He has allowed you to marry anyone else you like."

Singwil burst into tears. Gunal had a dog named Irija Ganggaja, very loyal to him. He barked loudly when he saw his master being buried alive. He came home and dragged at the end of Singwil's dress by his teeth and tears were rolling down his eyes. She understood his language. She decided to search for her husband all over the world. She would pray to *Tattara Rabuga* that nothing bad would happen to her husband. But even if death would befall him she as a chaste wife would bring him back to life at any cost.

She wiped away her tears and went to find out her husband. She took a life-giving wand, a mat made of cane, a fan and a bunch of feathers of cocks.

They went far away on the bank of the river. Irija Ganggaja was leading the way. He stopped near the hole and sniffed at the soil and barked. Singwil took

¹ Nahchi fishes—*Ophio cephalus barca*

this hint. She guessed that her husband must have been buried alive in this hole. She removed the stones from the mouth of the hole. Irija Ganggaja helped her as much as possible. She dragged up the dead Gunal, bathed him, laid him on the mat and fanned him as she prayed to the Supreme *Mithdei* (deity), *Tattara Rabuga*, *Sturu Pantura*, *Dakgipa Rugipa*, *Suulgipa Imboggipa*, *Janggini Nokgine*, *Jamani Biambi*¹ saying, "O *Tattara Rabuga*, you cause the living beings to breathe, you are the source of life ! Oh god ! be kind and return the life of my husband." Then she lightly stroked his body. Slowly he breathed and his eyes opened. It seemed to him that he had woke up after a long sleep in an exotic place. But the familiar face of his wife reassured him. Thus Singwil brought her dead husband back to life.



Anal caught hold of Gunal again when he was alone

¹ *Tattara Rabuga* etc. : *Tattara Rabuga* is the Supreme Deity in the Garo Pantheon, the rest being attributes to him,

and pretended to regret the incident. He said that he did not see that Gunal was inside the hole. He asked for Gunal's forgiveness and implored him not to be angry any more. Gunal believed his brother.

Once again Anal beguiled Gunal in a dense forest to collect nests of birds. They reached a *Simul* tree with a circumference of thirty feet. Anal told Gunal, "The nests of birds are on the top-most branch of this tree. You will prove yourself clever if you go up and bring these nests." Gunal could not resist himself from showing off his cleverness.

In fact the tree was an abode of evil spirits. There were no nests at all. As soon as Gunal climbed the tree, Anal shouted, "*Tattara Rabuga*, make an end of his life. Let him lose his breath and die. Wake up, let your head touch the sky." Just as his prayer was finished, lo ! the tree began to grow in height and by and by it almost touched the sky. Gunal thought as he sat on the tree top that he had reached the heavens. He was trembling with fear. But Anal was beside himself with malicious pleasure. The evil spirits might break his neck. He might fall down stricken with fear. And even if this would not happen he would surely die of starvation.

Anal and Gunal did not see but Irija Ganggaja watched everything, from a little distance. He was alarmed as the tree grew higher and higher and ran home to Singwil. Singwil followed the dog and reached the bottom of the *Simul* tree. She tried hard to find out Anal on the top of the tree but she could not. He was lost in thick foliage. She sat under the tree and wept bitterly as she prayed to the spirits residing on the tree. But they did not listen to her prayer. She spent seven days and seven nights without food and sleep under the tree with a vow to fast unto death if she would not get her husband back. She was thinning every day. She

entreated the birds as a last resort. Rema Gongga Toajeng Abiljeng, the patriarchal head of the golden backed woodpeckers was moved by her sorrow and said to her, "Bring an axe and a red turban and I shall bring down Gunal."

Singwil ran home and brought these things to the woodpecker. Rema Gongga Toajeng Abiljeng put on the red turban and chopped off some thick branches of the tree. He rose up and up and was soon lost from Singwil's view. As he reached the top he tied Gunal with the red turban to his own body and slid down rapidly. Gunal was again with his loyal wife Singwil. Singwil did not take back the red turban and the axe though the woodpecker insisted much. The red crest you see on the head of the woodpecker is the red turban given by Singwil and his sharp beaks are the axe. Before this he had short blunt beaks.

Singwil and Gunal bathed in the river and went home. Singwil warned Gunal against his brother. One day the brothers met face to face. Anal burst into crocodile tears and said, "Really, I don't know how the tree grew so high. Brother, don't misunderstand me." Gunal took his brother at his words and they moved together as before.

Anal took Gunal into the dense forest for making charcoal. They felled trees with much zest and dug a big hole. They filled the hole with logs of wood and set fire to them. When the fire was in great flare Anal asked Gunal to add more fuel to the fire. As soon as Gunal bent over the fire for adding fuel, Anal pushed him into it followed by a fresh load of fuel. Now he was cocksure about the end of his brother's life. But Irija Ganggaja took the message to Singwil and Singwil rushed to the spot with the life-giving wand, a mat, a fan and a bunch of cocktail feathers and pulled the burnt body of her husband from out of the fire, washed it, fanned it and lastly stroke it with the wand.

Her husband came back to life again. Gunal did not have any doubt about the wickedness of his brother and he thought of doing away with him.

As advised by Singwil Gunal arranged a feast in his house. There were beef, pork and wine for the guests. All the villagers assembled in his courtyard. The sound of drums¹ filled the air. The guests enjoyed music and dance with food and drink. Gunal sent for Anal many times but he pretended illness and remained home. In the evening Gunal filled a very, very long *bek* (a hollow bamboo vessel for drinking wine) with strong *chubitchi* (liquid extract of rice beer) and went into Anal's room. He inserted the *bek* forcibly into Anal's mouth and pushed it straight into his throat. He tried to shout, "It's burning, it's burning," but Gunal did not stop till his brother was choked to death.

He lived happily everafter with Singwil. He had many sons and daughters who grew up as brave soldiers and renowned persons amongst the Garos. A clear stream flowing on the north-west of the Ranggira Hill, remains named after Singwil upto this day.

¹ *Beating of Drums* : Whenever there is a feast with plenty of rice, beer, meat and rice in a well-to-do Garo house, it is a custom to beat drums and let people know of it. A *Nagara* (huge drum) is always kept hanging by the back-door of the house for such a purpose. The practice still survives among the Garos.

THE WATERFALL OF KA LIKAI

KA Likai is one of the most beautiful waterfalls in the Khasi Hills. Its stream flows from a certain river from the village of Rangjirteh and passes by the village of Nongriat. You can see the fall clearly from the village of Laitkynsew. In autumn the fall is at its peak of glory. There is a very sad story about this beautiful waterfall.

In days of old, there was in the village of Rangjirteh, a woman called Ka Likai. She was a poor woman. She became a widow after she had a daughter. She had to struggle hard to bring up her child. The child grew up. She started to toddle. Then she lisped to talk. Soon she began to run and play with other children. What a joy it was to see her! The poor woman would forget all her troubles looking at her beautiful little daughter.

In course of time Ka Likai re-married. The step-father did not love the little girl. He was jealous because Ka Likai had to devote much of her time to take care of the little girl. So he thought of killing her.

One day Ka Likai was away to carry some iron ore for earning money. Her husband took the chance. He killed the little girl. He cut her body into pieces and cooked curry with it. He kept this curry and rice ready for Ka Likai to eat after her return from work. He threw away the head and the bones of the child but he forgot to throw away the fingers. He kept them in the basket meant for betel-nuts.

Ka Likai came back tired and hungry and asked, "Is there any rice and curry for me?" Her husband replied, "Yes, it is there." Then she asked, "Where is the child?" He said casually, "She has gone

somewhere to play perhaps." Saying this he went out. Ka Likai now set herself to eating. She found the curry very palatable and she thought perhaps her husband had been given some flesh of a young pig sacrificed by someone.

After her meal she wanted to chew some betel-nuts and she took out the basket. And there what else could she see but her little one's fingers with the betel-nuts? She shrieked and mad with grief ran high upon the precipice.

The villagers watched her in dismay but nobody dared to touch her as she had a *dao* with her and she threw herself down into the water. From that day the waterfall had been called the "Fall of Ka Likai". The sound of the waterfall is like the shrieks of the unhappy woman.

A KING BETRAYED BY HIS QUEEN

IN ancient times the Khasi country was divided into a number of Siemships or Kingdoms under kings called the Siems.¹ There were Siems of Shillong, Sutnga and Malngiang. The village of Madur was under the Siemship of Malngiang. There was a king called U Kyllong reigning in Madur. Stern and courageous, he had the ambition to conquer the whole of the Synteng country and also the territory under the Siem of Shillong.

The powerful and ambitious king U Kyllong had many enemies who wanted his fall. But he could by no means be defeated. Not that he had a big army but he had a mysterious power in himself. He would come to life as many times as he would be killed. The Synteng king once chopped him off into pieces and was sure that he had finished his enemy. But no, the next morning he became alive, the same strong courageous king U Kyllong. The Synteng King was at a loss how to vanquish him.

He could guess that there was some secret within U Kyllong. But how to know the secret? He thought a great deal and made a plan. He called the most beautiful girl in the Synteng country and gave her colourful silk dresses, coral necklaces and bracelets and a crown of silver on her head and ordered her to marry the King of Madur and find out the secret of his power. The Synteng King promised to give her

¹ Siem : He is the chief even now to rule over the Siemship or Doloiship. He is not the owner of the community owned lands but he is appointed to supervise their activities. 'Siem' is a title given to a particular family. From amongst members of that family 'Siems' are chosen, the line of succession being from the female side.

many more dresses and ornaments if she would be successful.

In the Khasi Hills the market is a place where people come and meet each other and spend a nice time. King U Kyllong went to the market very often. He met this attractive girl there and decided to make her his queen.

The clever girl became his queen and pretended to be devoted to him. After some days the king grew fond of her. Now she began to ask him about the secret of his coming to life after being killed. The King could not see through her evil motive. He thought that this was her womanly curiosity and indulgently told her, "Dear queen, don't tell anybody what I shall tell you now. My life depends on my entrails. Everyday I take it out and wash it, afterwards I eat my food. There is none on earth who can kill me unless he gets hold of my entrails."



The queen was unfaithful and gave away the secret to the Synteng King.

One of the Synteng King's men hid himself and watched the king take out his entrails and put it in a corner of the bathing place. As soon as the king went into the water he seized the entrails while his companions killed the king. He cut the entrails into pieces and gave them to the dogs. No more did the King U Kyllong come to life and Madur was conquered.

WHY THE SUN IS ECLIPSED

IN the very early days of our history there lived a poor family in a village on the borders of the great Khasi forests. A daughter was born to them. She was named Ka Nam. She was very beautiful. Her mother wished to keep her to herself. She did not wish that the girl should work in the open with other people. She was afraid that the girl would be kidnapped or anyone would cast an evil eye on her. But the girl's father did not like the idea. Why should she be hidden away? A human being should work and see other human beings. She was allowed to grow up like any other girl. She was taught to work and make herself useful. The Khasi mother had to bow down to the father's wish.

One day her mother's fear came true. Ka Nam went to bring water from a well. And lo! a tiger came out of the forest and took her away. The name of this tiger was U Khla. He wanted to eat the child Ka Nam. Ka Nam knew that tigers were the most cruel of all animals. She was very scared. But the tiger U Khla did not do her any harm. She was very young. U Khla thought that as her size was very small she would not give her even one meal.

The tiger started taking care of Ka Nam. He brought her all kinds of good food which her father never gave her. The little girl Ka Nam felt quite at home in the tiger's den. The poor child could not see through his evil design. She lived happily and grew into a lovely maiden.

One day the tiger noticed that she was a full grown girl. He felt happy that he would get a good meal and was muttering to himself, "Now is the time. I have

fed the human child so long. Tomorrow I shall invite all my tiger friends and relatives and have a good feast on her."

A little mouse was passing by the den of U Khla and overheard what he said. She felt very sorry for the helpless and beautiful maiden and went to Ka Nam and told her of the evil design of the tiger. Ka Nam wept bitterly and asked the mouse to help her escape. The mouse was of tender heart and advised her to approach the magician U Hynroh, the giant toad. U Hynroh was a peevish and grim monster. But Ka Nam had no other way but to go to him. U Hynroh put a garment of toad skin on her and warned her not to take it off. She would have to die if she took it off. In his mind U Hynroh was after making Ka Nam his slave.

The mouse saw Ka Nam changed into an ugly toad. She deplored it very much. She knew that Ka Nam must live with toads from now on. So she secretly took her away from the realm of U Hynroh and brought her to the magic tree which was in the jungle. She told Ka Nam to climb it so that she might go far up into the sky and be safe for ever from U Khla and U Hynroh. Ka Nam climbed the tree and the mouse uttered, "Grow tall, dear tree, the sky is near, expand and grow." The tree soared high up and its branches touched the sky. Ka Nam alighted in the Blue Realm and the tree dwindled to its former size.

By and by the tigers assembled at the den of U Khla. But where was the maiden whose tender meat they would taste? Ka Nam could not be found and the tigers tore their host U Khla to pieces out of despair and anger.

In the meanwhile Ka Nam was roaming about in the shape of a toad, homeless in the Blue Realm. There everyone lived in beautiful palaces and they

hatefully refused to admit an ugly toad into their houses.

At last she came to Ka Sngi, the sun-goddess. Ka Sngi heard her story and took pity on her. She allowed Ka Nam to stay in a small out-house of her palace.

One day Ka Nam was alone. She took off her toad skin. Ka Sngi's son saw her. He was astonished to see a girl of rare beauty coming out of a hideous toad-skin. He reported to Ka Sngi the wonderful thing he had seen and asked her to put the girl in their own palace.

Ka Sngi was wise. She wanted to wait and see whether what her son had seen was a truth or an illusion. She kept watch over Ka Nam and observed a girl of delightful beauty coming out of the ugly toad skin. One day Ka Nam was asleep, casting aside the toad skin. Ka Sngi took it away and burnt it to ashes. Then she married her son to beautiful Ka Nam.

U Hynroh, the giant toad had an old quarrel with Ka Sngi because she refused to pay any tribute to him. So when he came to know that Ka Sngi freed Ka Nam from the magic spell cast on her by him he was in a fury. He rushed up into the Blue Realm to eat Ka Sngi. Ka Sngi, the sun-goddess was very bold. She fought a fierce fight with the hideous giant toad U Hynroh.

When men saw the fight from the earth they were very anxious to save Ka Sngi from U Hynroh. To scare U Hynroh away they beat the drums and uttered mournful sounds.

The ugly giant toad U Hynroh knew how to cast magic spell. But because he was of evil nature and a bully, he was a coward at heart and he could not

stand the heavy sound of drums and clamour of thousands of voices. He quickly fled away. Thus Ka Sngi was released from the grip of U Hynroh by mankind without their knowing it.

But U Hynroh, the revengeful king of toads even today tries at times to eat Ka Sngi, the sun-goddess. The sun is then covered with a shadow and the earth looks gloomy. People around the world call it eclipse. But the Khasis know that it is the time when the giant-toad U Hynroh tries to eat Ka Sngi, the sun-goddess and till this day they beat the drums and shout loudly when there is an eclipse of the sun.

HOW THE 'THLEN' WAS VANQUISHED

IN days of old there was a bridge in the village of Langhiang Kohgkhen. There the Khasis went to worship their gods. On their way there would be Rangjirteh where there is a cave. In the infinite darkness of the cave there rested the huge, formidable *thlen*'. The '*thlen*' was in the shape of a python, big and ugly python. As people had to pass by Rangjirteh they were swallowed up by the *thlen*. The *thlen* was not responsible for what it did. It was cursed by some god who ordained that he should be doing this. But even as he was a monster he would not touch any living being when it was alone. If ten people came near him he would eat only five of them, as he was ordered by that god to leave untouched half of the number of living beings he would come across.

Thus it went on for many, many years. Then the people were alarmed. How can the human race survive, on this earth if so many were being eaten up by the '*thlen*'? A meeting was called of all people—Khasis and others. They assembled to think of a way to kill the *thlen*. After a long discussion they made a plan. In the grove that is close to Laitryngew, which is called "the grove of U Suidnoh" there was a man called U Suidnoh. He would make friends with the '*thlen*'. As he was a very brave man he used to walk alone in dense forests in the darkness. When he went to the *thlen*, the *thlen* could not swallow him because it had to leave half of the number of living beings going near him.

Then it was decided that U Suidnoh would go to the *thlen* everyday and give him some flesh of goats or pigs or other cattle.

After some time the *thlen* was tamed by him.

Then he was advised by his people to arrange for a smelting house. A smelting house was erected by the giant U Ramhah at U Suidnoh's request and there he made a red hot iron rod. And do you know what he did with it? He held the iron rod with a pair of tongs and came to the *thlen*. He said coaxingly to it, "Brother-in-law open your mouth, I shall give you this piece of red flesh." The cave where the *thlen* lived was very dark, so the *thlen* could not see that it was not a piece of red flesh. It opened its mouth greedily. U Suidnoh pushed the red hot iron rod into it. It was cruel on the part of U Suidnoh to do it. But he could not help it. He did it to save the human race. The '*thlen*' was in acute pain as he swallowed the red hot piece of iron rod. It wriggled so violently that the earth shook. There was a violent earthquake.



U Suidnoh could not stand the earthquake. He fainted. All the people were startled because of the quake.

The people in the family of U Suidnoh felt very anxious for him as he did not return home after feeding the *thlen*. They came to the *thlen*'s cave. U Suidnoh revived after this shock and said "The *thlen* wriggled so terribly at the time of death that I could not stand it and fainted. Come, let us see what has happened to it."

They went inside the cave and found the carcass of the *thlen*. The news spread abroad that the *thlen* was no more. Now all the people, Khasis and the dwellers of the plains assembled to decide how they would divide the flesh of the *thlen*. It was decided that the flesh would be divided half and half between the people of the East and the West.

The people of the plains from the East were many in number. So they ate their whole share. But the Khasis from the west were smaller in number and so could not eat all the flesh in their share. Consequently the *thlen* did not leave them. It has remained with them for ever.

U Suidnoh was regarded a famous man after he killed the *thlen*. Everyone honours him till to-day. The Khasis worship U Suidnoh and make sacrifices to him.

16

HOW THE SIEMS OF SHILLONG CAME INTO BEING

I shall tell you now the story of a mysterious girl who never liked the society of other people and remained in loneliness for ever.

Long, long ago this girl lived in the cave of Marai. Marai is near the village of Pom la Krai at the source of the river Umiew or Umiam. This girl was young and beautiful. Everyone knew that she lived in the cave. But nobody ever saw her. She would always confine herself in the narrow dark cave.

But she could not hide herself for long. There was a very clever man called Nongriji Kongor. He decided to catch the mysterious girl. So he took a flower with him called "*U tiew-jalyng Kteng*", and stood in front of the cave. This flower bears very strong and charming scent. The girl was attracted by the scent and she came out to take it. But Nongriji Kongor was not such a fool that the flower could be snatched away from him. The girl tried to catch the flower but she could not. It was always at a distance from her. She could no longer resist the desire to have the flower. She came out in the open from her cave. That is what Nongriji Kongor wanted. As soon as she came in the open he caught her. He brought her to his house and married her.

In course of time some children were born to Nongriji Kongor. But the girl did not like her home or the children. One day she left her husband and children and returned to her lonely cave. The children were very fond of their mother and they coaxed her a lot to come back. Her husband implored her much, but no, she would never return.

The children became helpless. They grew up without their mother. But they became good and wise. They were modest, polite and respectful to their elders and superiors. The people loved them for their good qualities and took them to be the children of the gods and respected them.

The nobles and leaders of the Shillong raj decided to appoint them as *Siems*. Because they said that the mother of these children who happened to be a wonderful woman must be the daughter of the 'god Shillong' these children were called "*Ki Siem blei*" (the god kings of Shillong). Everything was good in their life except that their mother left them.

The Siem of Shillong is a very great and powerful chief in the Khasi Hills. He is called 'god-king' meaning that God has given over to him the largest portion of the Khasi country—the kingdom of Shillong to rule.

U LOH RYNDI AND KA LIH DOHKHA

IN ancient times there was a man from War Umwi called U Loh Ryndi. He went to fish one day in the Umwi stream. But he could catch one fish only. He came home, roasted the fish and put it on the *tyangir* (a swinging shelf of rope above the hearth). He forgot that he had kept the fish there and so he did not eat it.

The next morning he went out for work on the hill. When he came back he found his house cleanly swept, everything arranged in a nice way and rice cooked. He was surprised.

The next day also he went up the hill and the same thing happened. And this happened for many more days. He could not check his curiosity and wanted to find out the mystery behind it all.

He hid himself outside the village for the whole day and in the evening when it was time to cook rice he came back. He saw smoke rising from his house. He crept into the house. And lo! there was a beautiful woman there. "Who are you?" he asked her. She answered, "I am Ka Lih Dohkha. I am the fish whom you caught and forgot to eat." She hastily added, "No, don't let anyone know it; I have many of my kin. Let us go and bring them."

U Loh Ryndi gave the charge of his house to his mother and went away with Ka Lih Dohkha.

When they arrived at the bank of the stream and reached the spot wherefrom he had caught her, she jumped into the water. He stood on the bank. After a while she returned bringing with her a large number of her relatives. He could not count them. They all

went to the house of U Loh Ryndi. But as luck would have it they turned their back to the place soon as they reached it. A broomstick was on the threshold.¹ U Loh Ryndi's mother had left it there. Poor U Loh Ryndi was left alone as before.

While he sadly remembered this incident one night he dreamt that Ka Lih Dohkha had gone by the river Umwai Khyrwi to a village called Suhtnaga. The river is without any fish till today.

He went to angle for her in that river. He caught her and found that she did not forget him and was fond of him as before. He then married her and they had twelve daughters and a son. When the children of U Loh Ryndi and Ka Lih Dohkha grew up both of them returned to the stream Umwai Khyrwi. It is said that from the fishing rod of U Loh Ryndi, which he left on the bank of the stream, there grew up bamboos², the joints and leaves of which grow upside down even to the present day.

¹ A broomstick at the threshold is a bad omen and shows that the people coming in were not welcome at all. This belief is common throughout Assam.

² Assam is famous for bamboos.

RUPATYLLI

IF you have the opportunity to snatch a holiday and go to Laitkynsew or Mahadeo peak in the Khasi Hills you will find a river shining in the sun. It seems that a glittering silver necklace of a beautiful shape has been laid on the plain. The river has a fascinating name Rupatylli. Rupatylli in Khasi language is the name of a peculiarly shaped silver necklace commonly worn by the bonny buxom Khasi girls.

The river has a story which is fondly repeated till today. The story relates to the ancient time when the world was created.

The god of the Shillong peak had two daughters who were twins. As all twins are, they were very fond of each other. They grew into lovely young girls. One day they were playing on the Shillong peak. The Shillong peak was looking lovely with its rich downs rolling along and dotted with pines standing straight like comely slim women, with the wild flowers weaving a pattern in red, blue and mauve. But the undulating plains of Sylhet lay stretched before the eyes of the twins. They looked very inviting and suddenly the twins took it into their head to run a race to the plains of Sylhet.

So the sisters Ka Iam and Ka Ngot took the shape of two rivers Umiam and Umngot and leapt from the peak and flowed towards the plains of Sylhet. The shy and unassuming Ka Ngot was by nature demure and petit. Ka Iam was more dashing, showy and enterprising.

The river Umngot chose an easy track. She meandered through a long but soft bed and reached the plains of Sylhet. There she has been called

“Shengurkhat.” She went across Chhatak town and reached Dewara. She looked around to find her sister Umiam but in vain. She was naturally in a very joyful mood. She realised that she was going to win the race. She meandered slowly in a long and semi-circular way like a shiny silver necklace. The people who were on the hills saw this lovely semi-circle of a river gleaming in the sun and they shouted in joy, “Rupatylli ! Rupatylli !” From that time she has been called Rupatylli at Dewara.

Umiam, as was her adventurous nature took a difficult route through gorges and rocks. While Umngot was covering her long but soft track at ease, Umiam was leaping from one hill to another and lost much of her energy in her hazards.

Thus, much time was lost when she reached Dewara. She found her sister Umngot smiling in the shape of a silver necklace. As she had lost the race she wanted to hide herself. She broke herself up in five streams—Ka Umtong, Ka Torasa, Ka Pasbiria, Ka Kumarjani and Ka Dewara.

Both the rivers Umiam and Umngot have their sources close to the Shillong peak. The Khasis offer their *Khub-lei* (worship) to the river Umngot before they cross it as she had won the race. It is often seen that there is a party of Khasi men and women assembled on its bank. The young smiling Khasi women with rosy cheeks and in colourful dresses bring the offering of orchids, rhododendrons, azalias and wild roses. They deck their hair with the honey scented *Kapauphul* (*Aerides Odoratum*) of delicate colour and beauty. They dance to the sound of drums, their feet moving in rapid and short steps encircled by the Khasi men who participate in the dance in manly and long strides.

THE TREE THAT SHADOWED THE WORLD

TEN miles to the west of Shillong, the capital of Assam there stands the mountain of the Iei tree. It is also called the Dingei hill. This is one of the highest peaks in the Khasi land. It is as high as the Shillong peak.

In days of old the Khasi country was very prosperous. The hills were carpeted with the soft downs, dotted with high and straight pines. There were varieties of orchids, balsams, rhododendrons, azalias and wild roses splashing red and blue and mauve around. There were the lovely parrot flowers called *Bhatauphul*¹ growing on the branches of the pines. Many kinds of ferns and thick bushes of bamboos, betelnuts and reeds were there. The Khasis cultivated the land in *jhum* way. They grew rice from which they got their food and drink. They cultivated the *simul* tree which gave them the cotton for their clothes.

They were living happily but their happiness did not last long. A tree grew on the Dingei hill. It grew and grew and became so high that it seemed to touch the sky. The branches spread and covered the villages. The foliage was so thick that sunlight could not come through. As vegetation depends on sunlight the growth of all the other plants stopped. The plants withered and the delightful verdure faded away. The country became bleak. Only tigers, bears, wild dogs and wild pigs thrived prowling on their prey. One could hear the thumping of the feet of the elephants, the lowing of the bison and the roar of the tigers and could feel the terrible rhinoceros moving about in herds. But the

¹ *Bhatauphul* is an epiphytal growth; they are found on stems or branches of living trees.

birds like black and marsh partridges, the jungle fowls the doricks, wood cocks and the snipes were dying in numbers as they could not see in darkness.

Villagers all around were afraid and they thought they would be wiped out soon if they did not do anything. They shut themselves in their small and low roofed huts of *ikra* reeds for long. Now they assembled to find a way out. It was decided that all the men would work day long to cut off the Iei tree.

So they started striking hard at the tree with axes. They worked for the whole day and came back fully tired out. They took rice and rice bear and chewed raw betel-nuts^a for the whole night anxiously waiting for the dawn.

In the morning they came under the Iei tree and found all their labour was in vain as the tree had grown again from the cut portions. It stood as high as it was, if not higher. This went on for many days. Some of the men grew very nervous and they thought that some evil spirit was surely making the tree grow again and again. They thought the tree should not be touched. But unless the tree was destroyed the men would perish. But they could not decide if they would start lopping off the tree again or not.

A small bird called Ka Phreid came to help them. The bird told the people, "Well, I know why the tree is growing again and again as you are cutting it. Though they were not in a jovial mood they could not resist laughter at the words of the small bird. But the good natured Ka Phreid did not mind their jeers. She spoke, "Well do not laugh, just listen to me." It said that it was the cruel big tiger U Khla who was doing the mischief. As the men would stop cutting at night and go home U Khla would come and lick

^a In Assam raw betel-nuts are commonly chewed.

the incisions on the tree. U Khla wanted the tree to remain because it would help him prey upon man and animals in darkness. The tree got healed and those portions would grow sky high overnight.

Now the mystery was known. Was there any way to stop it? Yes, there was. They cut the branches again and left their axes stuck to the tree, edges upward and when the big tiger U Khla came again and licked the tree in darkness his tongue was cut to pieces and he ran away roaring in fear and bleeding profusely. He never came again.



Thus the tree was cut by the men. Again the sun shone on the earth. The land was filled with gold and green with harvest. The villages became prosperous once more.

It was a small bird Ka Phreid that saved the villagers.

People still point out the mountain and repeat the story.

THE LEGEND OF SOPHET BENG

THE world today is full of human beings. But there was a time when there was no human being on this earth. The earth was full of big trees with thick green foliage, and the trees were laden with luscious fruits. There were trees with flowers of myriads of colours. There were rivers with murmuring sounds and calm blue lakes and roaring azure seas but there was no man. There were many mountains and hills of which one was Sophet Beng. This hill still stands. It is a bare hill looking like a dome about thirteen miles to the north of Shillong. It is plainly visible from the Shillong-Gauhati high road. Sophet Beng, in Khasi language, means the centre of heaven.

The hill bears this name because of its significance in bringing mankind to this earth.

A very tall tree grew on this hill Sophet Beng. It touched the sky. The gods who live in the depth of the sky watched the beauty of this earth and used to think of coming down for a while. After this tree grew it was no longer a wishful thinking for the gods. They would walk on the green meadows, they would eat juicy fruits and bathe in the cool water of the river and pluck flowers of many colours in bunches and go up to the sky with the help of this tree as soon as evening would set in.

After some time the gods observed the land on the hill of Sophet Beng to be very fertile. So why not cultivate it? Sowing seeds and reaping of harvest is a pleasant job. So sixteen families of the gods decided to cultivate the land on the hill of Sophet Beng. Though they were cultivating the land even then they did not care to stay there permanently.

As was the situation, one of the gods was not satisfied with his position. He did not like that all of them should be equal. He wanted to defy his creator and rule over his brethren. He was after an opportunity to fulfil his ambition.

One day out of all the sixteen families who were cultivating the earth only seven came down. While they were busy with work, the ambitious one slipped away secretly and cut down the tall tree.

The seven families were left on this earth forever. These seven families called "*Ki Hinniew Skum*" (the seven roots) were the forefathers of all the people of the world.

21

THE STORY OF THE SIX BROTHERS AND THEIR NEPHEW

ONCE upon a time somewhere in the Mikir Hills, there lived a widow. She had a son. She was anxious to bring up her son well and asked her brothers to help her. She had six brothers. But far from helping her to rear up the small boy they were very jealous of him. The boy was cleverer and more handsome than his uncles.

The boy had only one thing to call his own. That was a calf. The calf had a glistening body and you cannot imagine how plump it was. The boy was very fond of it. He used to feed the calf and tend it with loving care. The six brothers did not like this. One day they killed the calf.

The boy as told was very clever. He took off the hide of calf and cut off one of its legs. He went to another village with that leg. There he came to a Brahmin's house. While nobody saw him, he buried the leg in a corner of the house. Then he went to the Brahmin and asked him, "Respected sir, how is it that there's smell of beef in your house?"

The Brahmin angrily retorted, "You fool! How dare you talk such sacrilege? Let a tiger eat you. Don't you know this is a Brahmin's house? Wicked fellow, I challenge you to find it out. If you can't find out any beef from my house, let my curse turn you to ashes." The boy meekly replied, "Well, let me search," and he pretended a search.

After a short while he presented the leg of the calf before the Brahmin, smiled with a flash of mischief and said "Sir, you challenged me, now see whether this is anything but a cow's leg." The Brahmin felt very

angry. But if his neighbours would come and see it, he would be an outcast. After a little thought he decided to take this Mikir boy into confidence and whispered to him, "My boy, don't let anyone know about this. I'll give you a *Man-thing* (bag) full of money". He gave him the money and the boy went away.

The boy felt very glad. He had never seen so much money in his life. He ran to his mother and said, "Mother, go and bring the rice-measuring pot from my uncles." She went and brought the pot. As soon as the widow was gone, her brothers talked among themselves. "It's really a mystery. They are so poor. What'll they do with the rice measuring pot? Let one of us go and secretly find out what they are doing." And they sent their younger brother. He hid himself behind the fence and saw that the mother and the son were measuring a large sum of money. He came back and reported, "The boy has brought a large heap of silver coins and they are measuring it with our rice measuring pot. Really, it is hard to believe my own eyes."

When the widow went to return the pot, her brothers told her, "Go home and send our nephew. We have some urgent work with him."

When the boy went to his uncles they asked him, "Wherefrom have you brought so much money? You borrowed the pot to measure money; is it not? It's no use hiding it from us, you'll be in trouble." He promptly answered, "There's nothing to hide. It's the price of the beef. When you killed my calf I cut it into pieces and went to the next village. The people there swarmed around me as soon as they got the smell of beef, and so all the beef was sold in a few minutes. They told me that I had gone there with too little a quantity of beef and they needed much more. Their appetite for meat seemed so keen that perhaps they would have eaten me if I had not promised to bring suf-

ficient beef for them, immediately. What shall I do, uncles?"

The six brothers thought this was a chance for earning some money and asked him, "Well if we take some beef for them, will they buy from us?" "Surely," the nephew replied, "and you have many cows, you can kill all of them and sell the beef. Perhaps you'll get so much money that it'll be difficult for you to carry it."

They did not lose any time at all. They killed all their cows and took big bags of beef on their back and were ready to go for selling it. Their nephew gave direction to that village where he had been and advised them thus, "The head of this village is a Brahmin. Just as you step into the village shout like this, 'Who's there to buy beef, and there'll be a throng of people around you.'"

The six brothers went to the next village and started hawking beef loudly in the village of the Brahmins. A number of people were chatting in that very Brahmin's parlour who was cheated by their nephew. All of them called the brothers in a chorus, "Yes, we'll buy beef, come here," and as they entered the out-house of the Brahmin these people caught the six brothers and flogged them at random. The brothers fell at the feet of those people and asked for their forgiveness. The Brahmins let them go after warning, "You are too bold. You have come to sell beef in a village of Brahmins. This is a good lesson for you to remember for your whole life. We hope you'll never come again."

The six brothers came out of the village with their limbs aching. The eldest of them said on their way home, "This boy has cheated us in a very nasty manner. Let us take revenge on him. We'll set fire to his house,"

This was an act congenial to their nature and all the brothers agreed. As soon as they reached home they set fire to their nephew's house very secretly. The hut was turned into a heap of ashes in no time. The poor widow and her son became homeless. The boy wove with much trouble, huge baskets of cane and filled these with ashes. Then he advanced towards a far-off village. He found that the people of this village had been suffering from acute eye-sore and could not see anything clearly. When the boy entered the village the villagers asked him, "Stranger, what's your idea, why have you come here?" The boy answered, "Brothers, I heard that all of you are suffering from acute eye-sore. I could not sit idle when I heard this, so I have brought some miraculous medicine." They felt grateful to him, and brought a lot of money and took the ashes to fill his baskets with the money they brought. The boy told them, "But there's a rule for the use of this medicine. Unless you go by this rule it'll not be of any use. Don't apply it on your eyes, soon as you get it. When I shall start for my village, I shall go a little far and shout, 'apply', and then all of you apply it at once on your eyes."

In this way, the boy used his wit and earned two bagfuls of money in lieu of the ashes. When he went out of sight the patients shouted, "Shall we apply the medicine now?" He replied from a distance, "Wait a little, don't be too much hasty, then all will be futile." He shouted these words, till he crossed the boundary of the village. When he reached a safe distance, he shouted, "Now rub it deep into your eyes." The patients rubbed the ashes deep into their eyes. And you can imagine what effect the miraculous medicine could have had on their eyes! Their eyes were bleeding and they were mad with pain. They talked among themselves, "This is how the Mikir boy has cheated us. Well, if he dares to show his face again we will tie his body tightly and thrash him well."

The boy reached home and again sent his mother for the rice measuring pot. The uncles were surprised. "Perhaps he has got some hidden treasure," they observed. They could not resist themselves. They came to their nephew, and asked, "Wherefrom have you brought so much money, dear?" The orphan replied, "It is the price of the ashes of my house to which you set fire. The people of the village where I went to sell the ashes were telling me repeatedly, 'We want more ashes, we want more ashes! But my hut was very small and I couldn't get much ashes from it. If you burn your huts you'll get a large amount of money and then perhaps you'll be able to build a thousand huts like the ones you have. And you'll need some porters to carry the money.'"

The brothers consulted among themselves. They decided that such chance should not slip. They set fire to all their huts immediately. The fire spread in flames and consumed all the big huts. They were all turned to ashes. Their neighbours thought that they were mad. However, ignoring everybody each of the brothers took a huge bag of ashes on his back and started his journey on the meadowy track. They bent under the weight of the ashes but they did not mind it as they thought about the money they would get out of it. Suddenly their nephew approached them running and said, "Go to the village where the people have eye-sore and hawk your ashes there." When they were hawking ashes there, the villagers invited them inside the village. As they came in, the six brothers were tied head to foot with ropes by the villagers who then rubbed the ashes deep into their eyes. They were almost blinded. Besides this, there came a shower of slaps and fists, pushes and kicks on them. Thrashing the brothers to their heart's content, the villagers released them. On their way home, the brothers discussed among themselves,

"This devilish boy has given us so much trouble. He has made us burn our houses and we have been flogged for selling ashes. We must take revenge on him. Let us reach home. We'll put him in an *Ingchin aru* (iron cage) and throw him into the river."

They caught the boy when they came home and put him into an *Ingchin aru* and took him to the jungle on the bank of the river. They rested there and thought, "This boy will go down the stream presently. He'll not be able to slip away from us now. Let us go and take some rice."

When they were away, a prince from another kingdom who was out hunting, came near the cage and saw the lad in it. He was taken aback and asked him, "What's the matter? How is it that you have been left in this dense forest in an '*Ingchin aru*' with your hands and feet tied?" The boy replied, "I have a maternal uncle's daughter. You can't imagine how beautiful she is. But as my ill luck would have it, my maternal uncles are pressing me hard to marry her. I have selected my own bride and my answer to them always is, 'I will never marry her. You are my *Ong* (uncles), I shall never allow you to be my *ong-hi* (father-in-law).' But they would not listen to me. At first, they coaxed me, then they flogged me soundly and when they could not persuade me by any means they thrust me into this cage and brought me here. I don't know what they'll do with me." The prince said, "If I marry her, then is the problem solved?" The boy answered, "Then you'll have to enter this cage and wait till my uncles come back." He remained silent for a while and said, "When they return they'll ask you, what else have you got to say?" Tell them, "Throw me into the river, that'll be better". Then if they tell you something more, say "Yes, I am ready."

The prince felt glad and said, "I shall remember

you for long." The boy said, "But it can't be so easy. If you go into the *Ingchin aru* in that princely dress and ornaments of yours they'll find out who you are. Take me out. I shall give you my clothes. Wear them and enter the cage."

The prince opened the door and the boy came out and changed his garments with those of the prince and the prince entered the cage in the shabby clothes of the Mikir boy. The boy advanced towards the village.

The brothers finished their meal and came back. One of them put his mouth on the cage and asked, "What else will you say?" The prince as taught by the boy answered "It would be better if you throw me into the river." "Then it'll be no fault of ours," said the brothers and hurled the caged prince into the river. The prince was going down rapidly into the river. "What's the matter?" he thought. "Am I to marry the princess who belongs to the kingdom of death?"

The six brothers ran home with perfect peace of mind. They thought that by this time their nephew must be dead.

As they reached home they saw a godly looking prince walking on the courtyard of their sisters. How beautiful was his dress! And his ornaments dazzled their eyes. They came near their sister's house and saw that this was nobody else than their nephew. They were wild with envy. They thought that the *Arnarn Atooms* (evil spirits) were pleased with the boy. A boy thrown into a river and still alive! Had anyone ever come across such an incident? Perhaps, he had gathered much of wealth from the *patalpuri* (the kingdom of the god of death). They grew curious about the land of the dead. They went to the boy and asked him, "Child, we threw you into the river because you told us to do so. You must have

been around the nether world (*patalpuri*). But how could you come back so soon? We are very eager to know how you went there."

The boy opened the story with an air of seriousness, "You threw me into the river and I went down slowly where only *Arnam ketha* knew. Suddenly a *palki* (sedan car) stopped near my cage and out came a number of armed guards. They showed much respect to me and opened the cage. They told me, "Sir, your grandparents have sent this *palki* for you to take you to the kingdom of the death-god. Kindly take your seat on it." I was scared but I thought that since I was already dead, why should I worry? Then the bearers of the *palki* swam and reached the kingdom of the death-god. I got down from the *palki* and saw a big house before me. Out came granny and grandpa. They caressed me and at the time of return they gave me this dress and ornaments and said, "Child, we are very eager to meet your uncles, tell them to come soon, for once." They also gave me a knife wrought with gold and said, "Perhaps your uncles will remember us when they see this knife." The boy showed the knife of the prince to his uncles and went on with his story. "Then the bearers of the *palki* left me at the bank of the river. You should go there very soon otherwise grandpa and granny will be very sorry."

The six brothers said, "Well, we understand it all, but how to reach that place?" The boy replied, "It's not very difficult. Bring an *Ingchin aru* for each of you and come with me on the bank of the river. Then each of you go into your own and I shall throw you into the river, one by one. Then three pairs of *palki* will come and take you straight to the *patal puri*."

The six brothers quickly went home and brought six *Ingchin arus*. They went with their nephew to the bank of the river and each one of them went into an

Ingchin aru. The boy tied them tightly inside the *Ingchin arus*.

He threw his eldest uncle first of all into the river. As soon as the cage was cast in the river there was a host of bubbles on the water. The nephew shouted, "Look, look, granny has given so much *harpo* (rice bear) to the uncle that he has become tipsy and is vomitting like anything." His uncles when they heard this, felt still more eager to reach their brother in the *patalpuri*. Each of them burst out of his cage, "Throw me first, throw me first." Then the nephew cast all of them into the river and went home with relief.

His aunts saw him alone and asked him when his uncles would return home. The boy replied "Why do you worry? They'll meet grandpa and granny after such a long time and they won't leave the uncles so soon. They have just now started drinking, then they'll eat good dishes and they'll dance and sing; so they'll be there long."

The wives of the six brothers kept awake for four nights but they did not return. They apprehended some danger and asked the nephew, "What's the matter, child? How is it that your uncles haven't returned yet?" The boy said, "They'll come soon." The six wives spent some more sleepless nights and asked the boy again, "Why haven't your uncles returned? We are terribly afraid that some evil has befallen them. Go and see what has happened." The boy now replied carelessly, "Don't talk uselessly. Do what you should; place a plate of rice for each on the *Nok-Sek*."¹

His aunts then realised what ill luck had come to them. They beat their breasts hard and cried loudly. The village echoed to the cries of the six widows.

¹ It is the custom of the Mikirs to give food for the dead. *Nok-sek* is a place in the kitchen where they put food for the dead.

The uncles who ill-treated the son of their widow sister were given early death by *Arnam Kethe* and their widows were left on this earth to lament over their death.

THE STORY OF HARATA KUNWAR

HARATA Kunwar was the youngest of six brothers. He did not like to work. The jungle always called him with its mystery and adventure. He hunted wild boar and deer while his brothers tilled their land. His brothers were fed up with him and complained to their father about him.

While the father listened to their complaint he decided to find out how each son loved him. He asked his eldest son, "My eldest one, how will you feed your old father?" The son replied, "Father, I shall be the headman of the village and shall arrange for meetings. There the villagers will bring many pots of rice and many bamboo joints full of tasty wine as present to me. I shall send you as much rice and wine as you need out of these gifts." The father was pleased.

Then the father said to the second son, "Now let me find out what my second son would do for me." He replied, "Father, I shall be a blacksmith and shall prepare knives and *daos* and sell them. With the money I earn by selling these, I shall buy you betel-nuts, betel leaves and milk-white rice." The father was pleased.

Then the father asked his third son, "My third one, how will you help your old father?" The third son answered, "I shall work on my land all day long. And I shall reap a rich paddy harvest, and get a large sum of money by selling it. And then I hope father, you will not be in want." The father was pleased.

Then the father asked the fourth son, "My dear fourth son, how will you look after your old father?" The fourth son replied, "Father, I shall hang on a rich man and flatter him. He will give me good food and

shelter and I shall share everything with you." The father kept silent for a while.

Then the father asked his fifth son, "My dear fifth son, how will you feed your old father?" The fifth son humbly said, "Father, I shall work as a servant to someone and with the little money I shall get I shall feed you." The father again kept silent for a while.

Then the father asked Harata his sixth and the youngest son, "My youngest son, how will you care for your old father?"

Harata Kunwar raised his head high and proudly declared, "Father, I do not think the same way my brothers do; I have much high ambition. I shall marry the daughter of the sun-god and get half of his kingdom and I shall put you on the throne of my kingdom. I shall order my attendants to bring water in pitchers made of gold. They will wash your hands and feet with this water. They will bring plates full of rice and pitchers full of wine for you."

The father was dumbfounded. The brothers burnt with anger and jealousy. And there ended the talk between father and sons.

Next day, at dawn, Harata Kunwar slipped away into the forest to hunt animals as usual. The old father went towards his field with his five sons. As they worked, the sons poisoned the mind of their father towards their youngest brother. They said to him, "Father, look at the way Harata speaks! He'll marry the daughter of the sun-god! Big talks only. He is totally useless. He does not work at all on the soil. Why shouldn't we get rid of him?" "Yes, that's what we should do," the father said very grimly.

After supper Harata's father and brothers started drinking. They were pouring wine down their throats

from a broad based earthen-jar. Wine brought devilish thoughts to the old man. He conspired with his sons and it was decided that a *Hem-thap* (a platform from upon which wild boars are hunted) would be erected and Harata would be sent there to hunt. They would go there and hide in darkness. As Harata would be dozing, one of them would kill him with a javelin. After such conspiracy, Harata's father and brothers went to bed.

But they did not know that Harata's eldest brother's wife eavesdropped and overheard the talk. She was fond of Harata. She loved him as her own brother. She was anxious to save Harata and could not sleep.

Next day while everyone was away in the field Harata Kunwar came to his sister-in-law with some wild fowls he had killed. The sister-in-law served him rice with affection. This was usually the time when they talked about things which interested both of them. But to-day she was glum for a while. Then tears rolled down her cheeks. Harata was surprised to see her in tears. "What is the matter with you sister-in-law?" he asked. She then told him what she had heard. Harata consoled her, "Don't worry about me. No one will be able to kill me. When they go out I shall throw six clods of earth on the roof. If you don't hear this sound, just at mid-day be sure that I am dead."

In the evening his father called Harata, patted him on the back and said as if with great affection, "Harata, my son, it is almost impossible to save the harvest from the wild pigs. They are eating up the paddy like anything. Tonight you go and scare them away. I have got a *hem-thap* erected in the forest wherefrom you'll do it."

Harata finished his meal, took his bows and arrows and went to the field. He took some seeds of '*purui*'

plant and squeezed its blood-red juice. Then he uprooted a banana tree and prepared a human effigy with it. He put this effigy flat on the *hem-thap*, made it hollow and filled it with the blood-red juice of the *purui* plant. Then he covered the whole of it with a white piece of cloth. This effigy was looking like someone asleep covering himself with a white sheet from head to foot.

At dead of night Harata's father and brothers started for the jungle, each one with his javelin. When they reached the *hem-thap* his father told his eldest brother, "Now strike Harata with all your might." He advanced towards the banana tree but he stopped. How his brother was sleeping innocently and soundly! He burst out, "Father, I can't do it! He is my brother, my youngest brother. Father, forgive me." All his brothers were ordered one by one by their father to kill Harata but all of them refused. The old man muttered with rage, "You are all good for nothing, cowards. You haven't the courage to kill a man." And he threw his javelin with all his might to pierce only the banana tree. The blood-red juice of the *purui* seed spurted out. He looked proudly at the red stream and remarked, "He was a real full blooded man, how forcefully is his blood coming out. This is like my son. He has been served right for his tall talks. Now he will go and marry the daughter of the sun-god, pooh! pooh!"

"Of whom are you talking, father?" Harata Kunwar's voice broke in. They were startled. This must be Harata Kunwar's ghost. Lost in fear the father and his sons ran on and on breathlessly till they reached their own farm-house. There they stayed for the night.

When it dawned they started for their home. As usual they finished their lunch and went to work on

their soil. Harata threw six clods of earth on the roof and his sister-in-law came out and took him in. She served him rice. Finishing his meal Harata said to her, "My dear sister-in-law, I shall no longer stay here with my enemies. I shall go away to some other place. Prepare some sweets for me."

His sister-in-law also felt that he should go away. She felt very sad for the boy and prepared some sweets for him. On the eve of parting Harata said to his sister-in-law, "If I do not die, I shall return and throw six clods of earth on the roof. Whenever you hear the sound, clean the *pinris* (small wooden seats) which are mine." They both wept. Then Harata left with his bows and arrows.

Harata travelled a long way. Soon he stopped in front of a hut thatched with hemp and shouted "Hallo granny, are you in ?" "I have nobody to call my own. Who are you calling yourself my grandson?" Harata Kunwar said, "Just come out and see who it is."

The old lady rushed out of her cottage. She was dressed quite fancifully. She wore a scarf with red and blue stripes, and she had wild flowers on her grey hair and on her ears. Harata liked her with all his heart. She spoke to him with a frown, "I am old and poor and live on alms and nobody comes to me. Why have you come here. What's your intention, boy?" Harata replied, "I shall stay with you dear granny." She could not believe him. "You are worthy to be a king. Why will you stay in such a forest with an old beggar woman, my boy?" Harata retorted with a smile, "Till I be a king, I shall stay near you." The old woman felt happy to have a nice-looking boy like Harata near her as her grandson. She was tired of her lonely life.

One morning she told him, "Harata, I am going to the king for alms. Sun the paddy. Then bathe in the river. But don't go upstream." Harata dried the

paddy, stored it and went to bathe in the river. He was all the while thinking why granny should forbid him to go upstream. There must be some mystery behind her order. He could not stop himself going upstream. He advanced much when he came across a bathing place prepared with a staircase coming down into the water. There he found bits of broken pitchers made of gold and silver.

He came home and asked her immediately about the *ghat*. She rebuked him for disobeying her. Then Harata implored her to tell him everything about what he saw. She could not resist telling the boy whom she had grown to love. She said, "This is *Bariti Richar ghat* (bathing place of the king of Biratpuri). The six daughters of the king come here every day for bath. But I warn you not to go there again." But Harata felt more and more like visiting the place. He was determined to see the princesses.

Next day as the old woman went begging he started for that spot of the river. He hid himself



near the ghat. The sun was at the highest altitude. Harata was looking at the sky. And lo ! What a beautiful sight it was ! Six beautiful fairies were flapping their wings and coming down from heaven. They were sisters. Their silver wings were sparkling with the rays of the sun. They alighted on the bank of the river, put their shiny clothes with care and dived into the water. They played in the water for a long while.

Noon rolled into twilight. Then the eldest sister remembered that much work remained to be done and their parents would be angry. They would have to cook, they would have to put the cocks and pigs in their cage and sty. So they changed their dresses and flew away. The youngest of the sisters was the most beautiful. Harata looked at them till they appeared to be mere dots from a distance. He wished to marry one of them. He asked his granny how he could marry one of these fairies. The old woman was furious with anger. She replied, "These are not fairies. They are the daughters of the sun-god. You are not a god. You are only a man. How can you marry any of them?"

But Harata would not listen. He knew that the old woman was fond of him. So he coaxed her all the while to tell him how he would be able to marry a daughter of the sun-god. The old woman had to yield. She said, "If you want to marry one of these girls, you'll have to do some difficult jobs. But you are very lazy. How you'll do these things I wonder!"

Harata was ready to do anything howsoever difficult it may be. She told him, "You are to cut off the weeds and clear the jungle on the bank of the river. That's your first task."

As soon as it dawned Harata ran to the jungle on

the bank of the Kapili river and cleared it in a day. He put together the felled trees and set them on fire. When all were burnt he sowed the seeds of maize and millet on the ashes. He also planted sugarcane and plantain trees also along with several flowering plants. This way of cultivation by burning the jungle vegetation is done in hilly areas. This method of cultivation is called *jhum*.

He was the favourite of the gods so it took only some moments for the seeds and saplings to flourish. There was the golden harvest of maize and millet each of its grain full with milk. There were lilies and marigold in full bloom.

The princesses came that day at their usual hour. After bath when they got out of the water they looked into the orchard of Harata Kunwar and asked, "Whose orchard is this ? We have never seen such a beautiful orchard before." They flew towards the heaven after a short while. Harata wished to marry the youngest of the princesses. He went home and asked the old woman, "What shall I do next ?" "Go and build a hut in the jungle," she ordered him. He went out. He returned after some time and said, "I have built the house, now bring me the housewife for that." The old woman shook her head and said, "No, the time is not ripe yet. You have to do many more things. Take a bamboo and carve out a flute". Harata prepared a flute out of a bamboo.

The time came when the grains ripened. Granny told him to play on his flute while he guarded his orchard. When Harata Kunwar came to his farmhouse he was in a world of splashing colours. As it were, some magic wand had touched the plants and flowers that were in bloom. He was drinking the beauty of the scene when he heard the flapping of wings. The princesses arrived. They dived into the river. They were playing in the water. After some-

time, the eldest of them said, "Let us return now." Then Harata began to play on his flute. The princesses were charmed by the music. The eldest sister said "It must be that person who owns this beautiful orchard. Let us go and bring some flowers, from him." They all came to his orchard and asked, "Who are you?" "I am Harata Kunwar," he replied. Then they asked for some flowers. Harata felt very happy. They took as many flowers as they liked and went away.

Harata came home. Granny asked him, "My dear boy, have you talked with the daughters of the sun-god?" He reported to her what had happened. The old woman bent her head and thought for a while. She found out a means to capture the youngest of the sun-god's daughter. Then she advised Harata, "Tomorrow is an auspicious day. Hide yourself by the bathing-ghat before the sisters come. Watch where they land. Five of these sisters are married—the youngest is still free. But *Paban raja*, the god of the winds is imploring the sun-god to wed his daughter to his son. He has sent bamboo joints full of wine and skins of gourds as presents to the sun-god at the time of proposing the marriage. However, I tell you what to do. When the princesses put their clothes on the river bank, take note of the petticoat and scarf that belong to the youngest of the sisters. And when they plunge themselves into the water take away that petticoat and scarf and come to me. I shall weave things like them quickly and put them just at the spot where she kept her own. And she will not be able to fly unless she puts on her own clothes. The eldest sister will implore you at that time to return her petticoat and scarf. Tell her that you'll return them only if one of them marries you."

Next morning he dug a trench on the sandy bank of the Kapili and hid himself,

Soon as it was noon the princesses dropped from the heavens. They put their clothes on the bank of the river and plunged into the river. When they were busy playing in the water Harata took away the striped scarf and petticoat of the youngest girl and ran to his granny. He took the scarf and petticoat woven by the old lady and placed them there. Then he started playing upon his flute. The six sisters rushed to Harata's hut as they listened to the music. They were lost in the music. After a long time the eldest sister remembered that they were late for returning home. She dragged them to the *ghat* and all of them changed their dresses.

Then they came back to Harata for some flowers. After they took flowers they started to fly. But alas! the youngest tried so hard but could not fly. Her wings were numbed. She rose a little bit above the ground but fell with a thud, and she was crying. The flying sisters saw this. They came down. The eldest sister guessed what had happened. She approached Harata for the dress of her youngest sister. Harata promptly replied, "Yes, I shall return her dress but one of you should marry me." The princesses felt troubled and they said to Harata, "How can any of us marry you? We are all married." Harata smiled a little mischievously and replied "Well, you remain with your husbands, the dress will remain with me."

The five sisters forced the youngest that she must marry Harata. She began to weep. She told her sisters, "Don't you know that the wind-god has arranged my marriage with his son? That he has sent father bamboo joints full of wine and other delicacies of food as presents?

"But you are not yet the daughter-in-law of the wind-god. The trouble ends if you marry Harata Kunwar. Look at the sky. It is darkening. We'll have to reach home. The cocks and the pigs

will be waiting for us to put them in place. Besides, father and mother must be very anxious seeing us late. We pray to "*Arnam Kethe*" that you be happy as the wife of Harata. We shall never forget you, we will see you every day as we'll come to bathe." The youngest sister replied, "Well, when all of you insist on me so much I shall marry him," and she burst into helpless tears. She was being left alone by her sisters with an unknown man in an unknown place. The sisters were also in tears as they consoled her. The eldest sister said to Harata, "Harata, because you are so much eager to marry one of us we are leaving our youngest sister with you. But she is the most beloved to us all. Never ill-treat her. Never tell her to cook. Never touch her hands and feet." Saying this she flew into the sky along with her sister. Harata then told the daughter of the sun-god, "Night has fallen; let us now go home."

Harata felt very happy now. He started hunting with fresh energy. He would rush into the jungle with his bows and arrows and hunt the deer and wild boar in numbers. Always you would see pieces of meat, hanging on the bamboo frame in front of his hut. Harata was very fond of dry meat.

One day Harata told the old woman, "Granny, I am home-sick." She replied, "Yes, my boy, you should be. You have your own land and house. But my dear, your wife is not feeling at home with you till now. You should stay here for some time more to make her happy." Harata said, "Granny, isn't it that we have been married for a year." "But she is not happy, my dear," said the old woman. So Harata continued to stay with the old woman. He worked very hard on his soil. His harvest was very rich. So much was the quantity of paddy, maize and millet that there was hardly any space to store the grains. The Mikirs believe that one who tills the soil with the sweat of one's brow pleases the god *Arnam Kethe*. *Arnam Kethe*

blessed Harata with a son. Harata was in the depth of bliss. His rich harvest, his beautiful wife, his lovely son, everything was joyful to him. But still he could not check his desire to go home and show his worth to his father and brothers.

He asked his granny once again, "Shall I go home now?" Granny told him, "My boy, the daughter of the sun-god is thinking of flying away to her father's kingdom. Harata then asked his wife "My dear wife, will you not visit my home?" She meekly agreed.

Next morning they started. They went a short distance when they were to go through a hilly track with many ups and downs. Harata's wife was too tired to travel with the child. Harata saw this and took off his turban and tied his wife and child on his back tightly with it and stepped up the hill. When he reached the top he came across a very big hill bird. The bird spread its wings barring his way. Its breast was jet black. It was picking earth with its beak. Harata coaxed it much to let him pass. But it would not move. So he could not but pierce it with an arrow. The bird flapped its wings in pain and died. He was hurrying on his way but could not go on. A huge black stone wall was there. How would he cross such a big wall? He went near it. Oh no, it was not a wall. It was a very huge wild boar. It was digging earth with its sharp tooth. It had created a big hole. The hill was trembling with the jerk as it dug the earth. Harata killed this boar. He was now dragging his prey on his way home, to make a grand feast of pork with it.

Harata reached home in the evening. He threw six clods of earth on the roof. His sister-in-law caught this signal. She washed all the wooden seats (*pinris*) and rushed out of the house shouting, "Harata has come, Harata has come." Harata put the dead boar by the fence and came in with his wife and child. The sister-in-law was very very glad to see them and she

gave them sweets, rice and wine to eat and drink. All his brothers were assembled. Harata's wife sat in the middle of the room. Her complexion was so bright that the room seemed to be lit with it. No one was able to look at her long. There was a kind of heat coming out of her body. Harata's brothers were amazed. A human being never looks like this. Had he really married the sun-god's daughter? Harata offered them the wild boar he had killed. But his brothers, five of them, could not bring the huge animal in. Harata remarked, "Now I find what kind of strong young men you are," saying this he lifted it on his shoulders with only one hand at ease and brought it to the courtyard. The boar was then roasted. Harata cut the meat in small pieces. The six brothers sat with a big pitcher of wine. Harata's sister-in-law served them with wine and meat. There never was such a feast in their house. They revelled in music and dance.

Next morning, the whole village woke up with the news that Harata had returned with a wife and child. And so many people came to see her ! When everyone was busy with the new-comer, Harata brought a big bamboo joint and put her dress which he stole from *Bariti Richar ghat* with her ornaments inside it and then tied it tightly on the thatch of his house.

As morning passed into noon the number of relatives and neighbours increased. They all were talking among themselves, "A human being cannot be so beautiful. She must be the daughter of some god." Harata's wife told them softly, "I am not looking half as beautiful as I would in the clothes given by my father." The old women who were there said, "Then let her wear those clothes and let us see her in full bloom of her beauty." Harata's father was angry with him because Harata did not allow her to wear these clothes. She told her father-in-law where these clothes were kept. Harata's father jumped on the roof

and gave her the bamboo joint. She now wore the dress which Harata had taken away from the river bank. She looked like a flame.

And lo ! She was rising up and up towards the sky. Harata Kunwar was coming home after his visit to friends. He saw his wife flying and alas! he felt so sad, but she consoled him, "Don't be sad, I shall come back." He wept for a long time for her. Then one day he left home to meet the granny who might help him now. He tied his son to his back with a piece of cloth for his long journey.

When he reached the old woman's door he set his son free from his back and wept a lot. The old woman understood everything. She said, "My boy, she belongs to the sky and how can she set her mind on this earth ? How can you get her ? You cannot fly up into the sky like her."

She gave some burnt meat to him to eat but he did not even touch it. The old woman took pity on Harata. Then she thought out a plan which would help him. She said to Harata, "The son of the wind-god will go with his attendants to Birat Puri to marry your wife. Before he reaches there, the elephant of the sun-god will come to bathe in this river. Lie in ambush with your son, in right time. When the elephant will be going back after his bath quickly tie your son on your back with your turban and then catch hold of the elephant's tail tightly. If the elephant resents and roars at you tell him that your wife is in the kingdom of *Bariti Richa*. He will be silent to hear this and will take you to heaven. The sun-god's kingdom is a wonderful place. There you'll see trees of gold with clusters of silver flowers, the rivers flowing with milk and the ghats wrought with glistening gems. In the afternoon your wife's attendants will come for water. Ask one of them to give some water for your son. One of them will surely come to you with a pitcher

of water. Drop your ring inside the pitcher without anybody's knowledge." Now she smiled mischievously and said, "And then tell me what happens? Well, let's wait and see". She went to her kitchen.

Next morning Harata hid himself in the sand on the bank of the river Kapili. All of a sudden he saw a stormy mass of cloud coming down on the earth with sound and fury. It was the huge elephant of the sun-god. Harata took off his *pugri* and tied his son with it and caught hold of the elephant's tail. The elephant did not get angry.

Soon as the elephant reached the kingdom of the sun-god Harata left its tail and hid himself nearby.

It was a festive day for *Biratipuri*. Harata's wife was to be wedded to the son of Pabanraja (the wind-god). The wind-god had come to the kingdom of the sun-god with a retinue of forty-eight. His attendants were all peevish. So the people of *Biratipuri* were much in fear of their displeasure. The sun-god sat on an *ing* (dais) in front of his room. The bridegroom's party gave him a pitcherful of wine. The sun-god asked the wind-god, "Oh king, may I know why you have kindly come to visit my kingdom?" Pabana-raja replied, "My wife is getting old, so I have come to take your daughter as my daughter-in-law to help my wife in household work" The sun-god told politely, "My lord, my daughter is not good at all in household work. She does not weave¹ and she does not do any other work." The wind-god said, "That does not matter, we shall teach her everything." Then the sun god asked his queen whether his daughter had given her consent to the marriage. The marriage would not take place without the consent of the bride and till she consented the sun-god would not even touch the pitcher of wine presented to him by the wind-god. But the bride

¹ To weave is a must for all girls in Assam.

was glum and silent with her head bent. The queen asked her again and again whether she would marry. She burst into tears. The queen was puzzled.

There is a custom in the kingdom of the sun-god. The bride is to bathe with the water of the river on the night of marriage. And as the attendants poured the water on her head from one of the pitchers came-out that ring of Harata. The ring fell at the feet of the princess. The princess picked it up. It was her husband's ring. She wondered how it had come so far? Thoughts of Harata Kunwar came into her mind. What a hero he was! How bold he was! How he wept for her when she was coming away. The princess longed for her husband and her child. She asked her servant as to who had brought the water with the ring. An old woman had filled the pitcher with this water. She told the princess everything. The princess ordered her to bring the person who drank the water of her pitcher.

Harata was brought before the princess. He had his son with him. As soon as Harata put down his son from his back he ran to his mother. The princess embraced her son and wept.

The sun-god saw this. He was saying to himself, "Now I know why she did not agree to marry. She has a son and I was marrying her to the son of wind-god. Fie on me!" He told the wind-god, "My lord, now you see what has happened. So, kindly go back to your own kingdom with your people." The wind-god was beside himself with anger. He was unable to bear such an insult. But the sun-god is much more powerful than the wind-god. So he raised a fierce storm and felled some big trees and went away. The storm lasted for a little while. Then all was quiet.

The son-in-law came for the first time. So there was a grand feast. At night Harata's wife slept in the

Kam (women's house). Harata stayed in the men's house. He sent his dress to his wife. That is the custom. His wife put the dress on the bed. She clasped her son and fell asleep.

Harata stayed in the sun-god's kingdom long after the marriage feast. He worked very hard. He reaped a big harvest. Three years passed. Twelve farm-houses and twelve granaries were full with grains. Now he wished to go home. One day he said to his wife, "My dear wife, even the birds live in their own nests. But we are in another's house. Let us now return to the earth and make a sweet home for ourselves. Our son will be big and he will have some brothers and sisters to play with. I shall work very hard and feed them. Tell *Omhai* (the father-in-law) this very day, dear." Harata's wife shyly told the queen, "Mother, your son-in-law wants to return to the earth. He wishes me to go with him. He'll go one of these days. What shall I tell him?" The queen clasped her daughter to her breast and said, "As I give away my harvest to my subjects so I have given you away to Harata. I cannot force you to stay." She heaved a sigh. She then asked her daughter, "What shall I give you? Gold or silver or some servants or what?"

Harata was there. He said, "I never had a gift from anyone. All that I have, I've earned. I shall take nothing else but my wife with me."

An elephant came. It had gold seats on its back. It was led on the spot by servants of the king. Harata rode on it. His son was tied on his back. His wife sat by him. After two days Harata reached home with his wife and son. He became a king in time. His was a kingdom of happiness and prosperity. As a child he dreamt to be a king. He fulfilled his dream.

SALUK KUNWAR

In ancient times in Assam there was a king who had a beautiful daughter. The king was so fond of her that she was weighed with flowers every day. The gardener's wife used to supply the flowers.

There was a pond nearby the palace where people usually came for fishing. One day the gardener and his wife came to the same pond not for fishing but for plucking the *saluk* flowers. *Saluks* are a species of lotus without smell. It is of white, pink and yellow varieties. They brought many flowers one of which was very big. These flowers are cooked and eaten as vegetables. The gardener took the *Katari* and was about to cut the big *saluk* in pieces when the flower burst out :

*"Aare Aare katbe be bura
Hama heki Saluk Kunwar genru raja."*

(Cut me at the side, oh old man so that I can come out. I am Saluk Kunwar.)

The old man called his wife out of fear and gave her the flower. She fearlessly cut the flower at the side and out came a beautiful boy of tender age. This couple was childless and so they adopted him as their own child and called him Saluk Kunwar.

In course of time Saluk Kunwar grew into a young man while his mother continued to take flowers to the princess who also had grown into a young girl of exquisite beauty. One day while the old woman was ready to go to the palace with flowers Saluk Kunwar made a garland of *Khadikajai* (Arabian jasmine) without string and placed it with the flowers. His mother found it out and she angrily refused to carry it to the

princess but Saluk Kunwar persuaded her to take it to the princess.

The princess was as usual weighed with flowers and while she was looking through them she found a lot of *marijidara*, *rajani gandha*, *jai* (Jasmine) Keteki (screw pipe), roses, azalias, parrot flowers, *Kapauphool*, fragrant *champas* and rhododendrons, *juti* flowers, *saluks* and lotuses with soft smell. She was intoxicated with the smell and colour when suddenly she found out the garland of *khadikajai* and she asked the gardener's wife about it. She did not deceive her and told that it came from Saluk Kunwar. The princess was pleased and she felt a strong desire to meet him. They met, and fell in love. The young couple decided to marry. Saluk Kunwar put some vermilion on the head of the princess and that celebrated the secret marriage. The marriage was kept a secret.

Saluk Kunwar used to ride a peacock to meet the princess at night when everyone in the palace would be asleep. He would advise the peacock so that the gardener's wife would not see:

*"Uru uru Bese Manjusa
Maye dekha pabe ga."*

(Fly, fly immediately, oh peacock, so that mother may not see.)

The palace used to be guarded by sentries with spears so the princess would sing

*"Phira phira Sonya mora
Balame bhansabe ga."*

(Oh my love, come quickly otherwise spears will strike you.)

But one night he was really struck with a spear while he was coming to the palace. The princess tried her best to revive him but it was all in vain. Saluk Kunwar died. The princess was beside herself with grief and did not come out of her room in the morn-

ing. When everybody in the palace failed to make her open her door the king himself went near her door and asked her to open. She said,

“*Suna Suna Baba mora*
Saluk Kunwar sonya mora
Balame bhasaila ga.”

(Oh Father ! Saluk Kunwar my husband has been killed with a spear.)

She wept and opened her door and people were speechless to see the dead body of Saluk Kunwar. Amidst the heart-breaking cries of the princess his body was being taken for cremation when a parrot flew to the spot with *amrita bari* (nectar water) and sprinkled it on Saluk Kunwar. He came to life and sat up. Soon as he gained consciousness he asked angrily, “Who has brought me here, why am I brought here?” The king decided to give his daughter in proper marriage to Saluk Kunwar. The gardener and his wife were informed. They came to the palace with fish, sweet-meats, curd and betelnuts. After they came all the Brahmins of the village were called and an auspicious day was selected. Now *pankhili* was celebrated; betelnuts and betel-leaves with two pieces of gold and two pieces of silver were offered to the idol of Lakshmi in the palace.

The marriage was to take place on the third-day. Saluk Kunwar and the princess were solemnly bathed and the palace was throbbing with merry-making. The drummers were beating the drums, children were dressed in their best and friends and relatives were all assembled. There was a play staged at night. This was to take place in Saluk Kunwar’s house but as he was a poor gardener’s son it was held in the palace. Both of them were bathed ceremonially at this night.

Next morning the priest sprinkled water with a mango-leaf on Saluk Kunwar and the princess and placed *adibash* (the black ointment) on their forehead.

Saluk Kunwar was anointed with sandal paste, a crown of pith and flowers was placed on his head and he was presented with a ring, a pair of clothes and some curd, by a young girl of the palace.

He was seated on a stool within a space enclosed with split bamboos and plantain trees and the princess walked round him seven times and threw flowers and vermilion on Saluk Kunwar each time. Sampradan (ceremony) was done by the king and the girl was given away.

Then the fire with mango wood was lighted and rice, *ghee* and flowers were offered to the fire by Saluk Kunwar, *mantras* were uttered by the priest and he was married to the princess.

But many of the people in the palace were jealous of Saluk Kunwar and wanted to harm him. One day all the relatives of the king went hunting with Saluk Kunwar. They thought that Saluk Kunwar, as he was brought up by the poor gardener, would not be able to hunt. But it happened otherwise. They could not hunt anything and felt ashamed. Saluk Kunwar killed some deer. He withdrew from the party and sat nearby in the guise of a *yogi*. As the relatives of the king approached him, he gave a deer to each one of them and put a mark of '*chilim*' on the back of each. Then he came home with one deer for himself.

These people would not let him stay in peace. They went for *shikar* another day. In course of the day, the king and all of his party felt hungry and thirsty. They brought *bhok laroo* (the sweetmeat that satisfies hunger) with them for hunger but they forgot to bring *piyas laroo* (the sweetmeat that quenches thirst) for thirst and they sent Saluk Kunwar for water. He brought water from a pond which belonged to a demoness. The king, as he did not like Saluk Kunwar, sold him to the demoness for the water and proceeded towards the palace.

The princess, as she did not see her husband, asked her father,

*'Suna Suna Baba mora
Saluk Kunwar genru raja
Aarai kata dur ga'*

(Oh father, how far is my Saluk Kunwar?)

The king replied,

*'Suna Suna beti more
Saluk Kunwar genru raja
Juya khele pasha khele
Aarai bahut dur ga'*

(Oh my daughter, he is gambling with dice, far far away.)

Everyone said the same to her. None told her the truth. But she had two dogs called Chaonra and Bhaonra who reported the truth to her. Then she went in search for her husband with Chaonra and Bhaonra with her. There was a washerman at the place where Saluk Kunwar was sold. The washerman helped her. He hid her with Chaonra and Bhaonra. The demoness sniffed at the air and got human smell and asked the washerman about it. He lied to her. He was all the while thinking of saving Saluk Kunwar and the princess. He thought out a plan. He advised Saluk Kunwar to play a jubilant tune on the flute and go away into the depth of the forest. As he did so the demoness with her kin followed him and went into the depth of the forest. But when he stopped playing she could not find out the way back and was lost in the thick of the forest with all her kin.

Saluk Kunwar returned home with the princess and the two loyal dogs Chaonra and Bhaonra. He met the king and described his skill in hunting. The mark of *chilim*¹ on the back of the king's relatives proved Saluk Kunwar's statement to be true. The king felt ashamed and yielded at once.

The king gave his kingdom to Saluk Kunwar and he lived with his loving wife happily thereafter.

¹*Chilim* is round flat pieces of charcoal used for getting smoke of tobacco.

